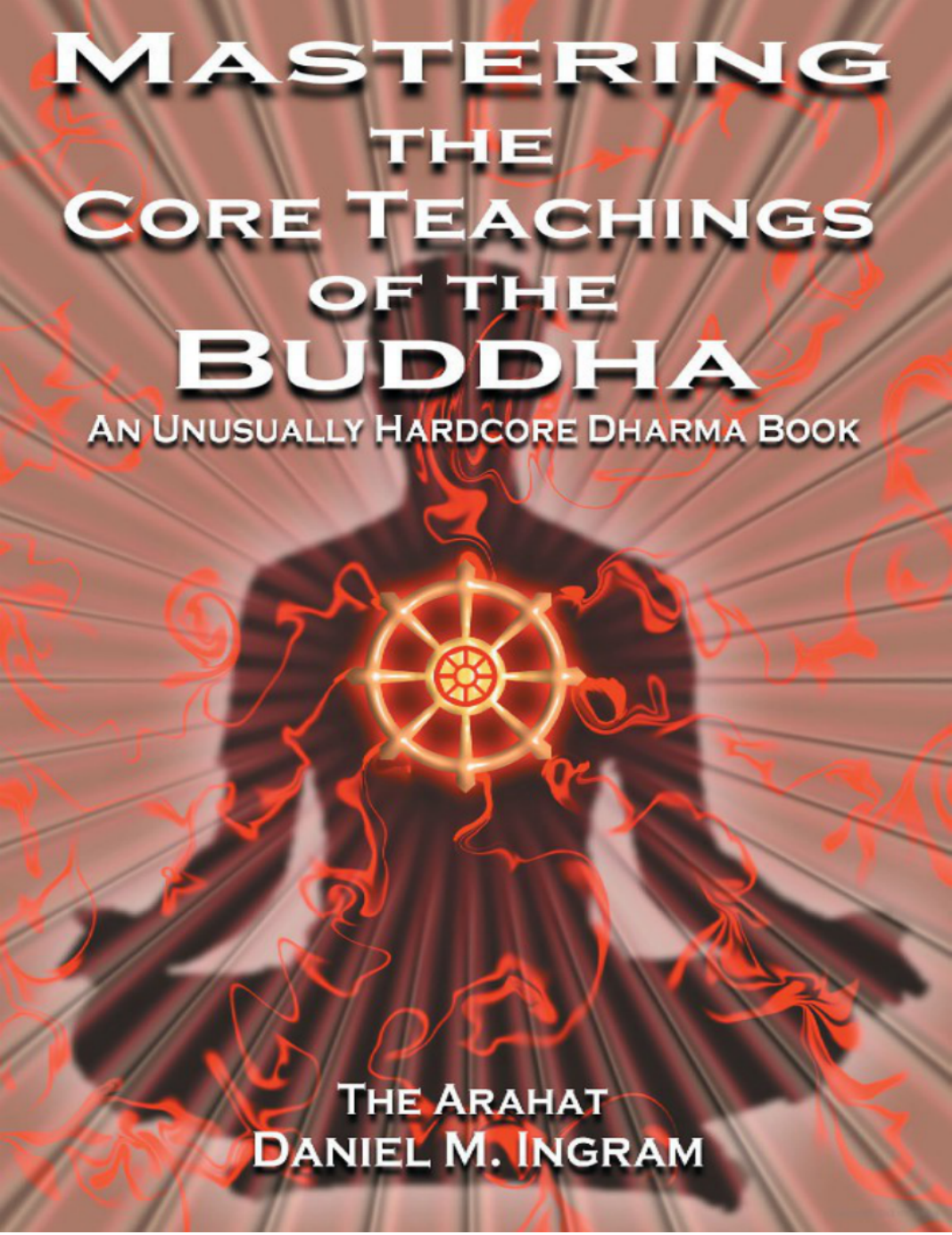
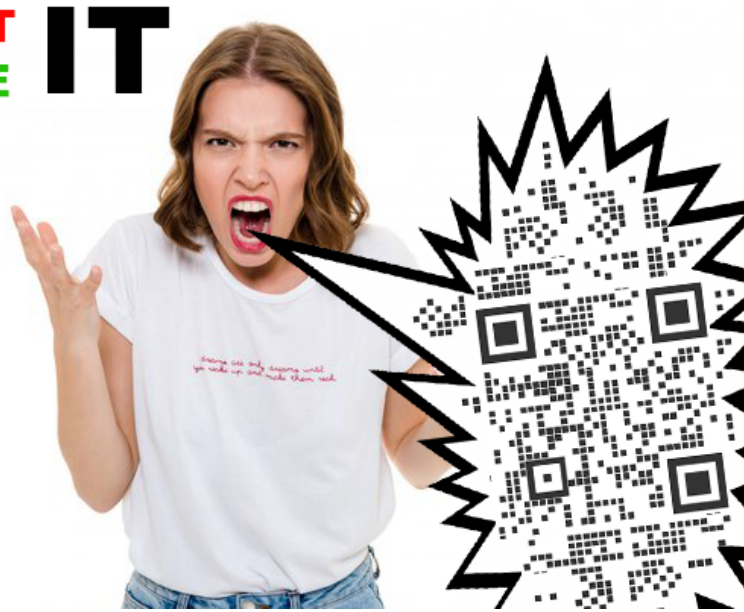
Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha

An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book



The Arahat
Daniel M. Ingram

SHOUT
SHARE
IT



•

MASTERING
THE
CORE T EACHINGS
OF THE
BUDDHA
An Unusually Hardcore
Dharma Book
by
The Interdependent Universe
but conventionally attributed to
The Arahat
Daniel M. Ingram, MD MSPH
Third Edition
Copyright © April, 2007, By Daniel M. Ingram
daniel_ingram@interactivebuddha.com
www.interactivebuddha.com
This book is dedicated to the memory of the late Bill Hamilton.

His relentless dedication to the cultivation and promotion of wisdom despite all the consequences made him a truly great teacher.

CONTENTS

Contents.....
Foreword and Warning.....iv Part I: The Fundamentals.....1
1. Introduction to Part I.....2
2. Morality, The First and Last Training.....4
3. Concentration, The Second Training.....9
4. Wisdom, The Third Training.....12
5. The Three Characteristics.....16
Impermanence.....
Suffering.....
No-self.....28
The Five Spiritual Faculties 34
Faith and Wisdom.....34
Energy and Concentration.....35
Mindfulness.....
6. The Seven Factors of Enlightenment 38
Mindfulness.....
Investigation of the Truth.....40

Energy.....
Rapture.....
Tranquility.....
Concentration.....
Equanimity.....
7. The Three Trainings Revisited.....52
8. The Four Noble Truths 60
Truth Number One: Suffering.....60
Truth Number Two: “Desire”.....62
Truth Number Three: The End of Suffering.....65
Truth Number Four: The Path.....66
9. Practical Meditation Considerations.....67
When, where and for how long?.....67
Daily life and Retreats.....68
Postures.....
Objects for Insight Practices.....75
Resolve.....
Teachers.....
10. Summary.....84
11. Conclusion to Part I.....85
i
Part II: Light and Shadows.....87
12. Introduction to Parts II & III.....88
13. Buddhism vs. The Buddha *.....92
14. Content and Ultimate Reality *.....97
15. What Went Wrong? *.....102
16. A Clear Goal 111
17. Harnessing the Energy of the “Defilements” 119
18. Right Thought and the Aegean Stables 124
19. From Content to Insight.....127
Part III: Mastery.....132
20. Concentration vs.

Insight.....133
21. The Concentration States (Samatha Jhanas) 139
The First Jhana.....139
The Second Jhana.....141
The Third Jhana.....142
The Fourth Jhana.....143
The “Psychic Powers”.....144
22. No-self vs. True Self 153
23. The Formless Realms 159
Boundless Space, The Fifth Jhana.....159
Boundless Consciousness, The Sixth Jhana.....160
Nothingness, The Seventh Jhana.....161
Neither Perception Nor Yet Non-perception, The Eighth Jhana.....163
24. The Progress of Insight 166
1. Mind and Body.....171
2. Cause and Effect.....172
3. The Three Characteristics.....173
4. The Arising and Passing Away.....175
5. Dissolution, Entrance to the Dark Night.....181
6. Fear.....191
7. Misery.....191
8. Disgust.....192
9. Desire for Deliverance.....192

10. Re-observation.....193
11. Equanimity.....203
12. Conformity.....211
13. Change of Lineage.....211
14. Path.....211
15. Fruition.....211
16. Review.....213
25. The Vipassana Jhanas.....217
Bill Hamilton's Model.....219
Fractals.....
U Pandita's Model.....227
Inklings of One More Model.....228
ii
26. How the Maps Help 229
27. The Three Doors.....240
28. "Was That Emptiness?" 245
29. Beyond First Path ("What Next?") 252
30. Models of the Stages of Enlightenment *.....261
The Non-Duality Model.....268
The Sudden Schools of Awakening.....269
The Fundamental Perception Models.....270
The Specific Perception Models.....271
The Emotional Models.....272
The Theravada Four Path Model.....274
A Revised Four Path Model.....279

A Simple Model.....283
The Action Models.....285
The Power Models.....288
The Tibetan Ten Bhumi Model.....290
The Tibetan Five Path Model.....291
The Energetic Models.....292
The Specific Knowledge Models.....293
The Psychological Models.....294
The Thought Models.....297
The God Models.....301
The Physical Models.....302
The Radiance Models.....303
The Karma Models.....306
The Perpetual Bliss Models.....307
The Three Kayas.....308
The Immortality models.....314
The Transcendence Models.....315
The Extinction Models.....316
The Love Models.....317
The Unity Models.....318
The Social Models.....318
The Three Yanas.....320

Ditching our “Stuff” vs. Ditching the Split.....322
The “Nothing to Do” and “You are Already There” Schools.....324
Final Points.....328
31. So What’s “Full Enlightenment”? *.....329
32. Integration*.....333
33. It is Possible! 337
34. More on the “Mushroom Factor”*.....339
35. So Who The Heck Is Daniel M. Ingram?.....346
36. Conclusion And Best Wishes.....352
Appendix: The Cessation of Perception and Feeling (Nirodha Samapatti).....353
Index.....357

FOREWORD AND WARNING

When I was about 15 years old I accidentally ran into some of the classic early meditation experiences described in the ancient texts and my reluctant spiritual quest began. I did not realize what had happened, nor did I realize that I had crossed something like a point of no return, something I would later call the Arising and Passing Away. I knew that I had had a very strange dream with bright lights, that my entire body and world had seemed to explode like fireworks, and that afterwards I somehow had to find something, but I had no idea what that was. I philosophized frantically for years until I finally began to realize that no amount of thinking was going to solve my deeper spiritual issues and complete the cycle of practice that had already started.

I had a very good friend that was in the band that employed me as a sound tech and roadie. He was in a similar place, caught like me in something we would later call the Dark Night and other names. He also realized that logic and cognitive restructuring were not going to help us in the end. We looked carefully at what other philosophers had done when they came to the same point, and noted that some of our favorites had turned to mystical practices. We reasoned that some sort of non-dual wisdom that came from direct experience was the only way to go, but acquiring that sort of wisdom seemed a daunting task if not impossible.

He was a bit farther along than I was in his spiritual crisis, and finally he had no choice but to give it a try. He quit the music

business, moved back to California, and lived in a run down old mobile home, driving pizza to save money so that he could go off on a spiritual quest. He finally did some intensive meditation retreats and then eventually took off to Asia for a year of intensive practice under the guidance of meditation masters in the Burmese Theravada Buddhist tradition.

When he came back, the benefits of his practice were obvious, and a few years later I began to try to follow a similar path.

In 1994, I began going on intensive meditation retreats and doing a lot of daily practice. I also ran into some very odd and interesting experiences, and began to look around for more guidance on how to proceed and keep things in perspective. Good teachers were few and far iv

Foreword and Warning

away, their time limited and often expensive to obtain, and their answers to my questions were often guarded and cryptic. Even my old music friend was keeping most of what he knew to himself, and issues around disclosure of meditation theory and personal practice details nearly cost us our friendship.

Frustrated, I turned to books, reading extensively, poring over texts both modern and ancient looking for conceptual frameworks that might help me navigate skillfully in territory that was completely outside my previous experience. Despite having access to an astounding number of great and detailed dharma books, I found that they left out lots of details that turned out to be very important. I learned the hard way that using conceptual frameworks that were too idealistic or that were not fully explained could be as bad as using none at all. Further, I found that much of the theory about progress contained ideals and myths that simply did not hold up to reality testing, as much as I wanted them to.

I also came to the profound realization that they have actually worked all of this stuff out. Those darn Buddhists have come up with very simple techniques that lead directly to remarkable results if you follow instructions and get the dose high enough. While some people don't like this sort of cookbook approach to meditation, I am so grateful for their recipes that words fail to express my profound gratitude for the successes they have afforded me.

Their simple and ancient practices revealed more and more of what I sought. I found my experiences filling in the gaps in the texts and teachings, debunking the myths that pervade the standard Buddhist dogma and revealing the secrets meditation teachers routinely keep to themselves. Finally, I came to a place where I felt comfortable writing the book that I had been looking for, the book you now hold in your hands.

This book is for those who really want to master the core teachings of the Buddha and who are willing to put in the time and effort required. It is also for those who are tired of having to decipher the code of modern and ancient dharma books, as it is designed to be honest, explicit, straightforward and rigorously technical. Like many of the commentaries on the Pali Canon, it is organized along the lines of v

the three basic trainings that the Buddha taught: morality, concentration and wisdom.

Throughout this book I have tried to be as utilitarian and pragmatic as possible, and the emphasis is always on how to actually "get it" at the level that makes some difference. All sections also assume to some degree that you have a practice of some sort, hang out in some sort of spiritual scene, and know a bit of the standard dharma lingo. All sections also assume that you are willing to do the work.

I have tried to include enough information to make this book capable of standing on its own as a manual of meditation and for walking the spiritual path. However, I have also tried to focus on those areas that I consider to be my core competencies and also those areas of the spiritual path that I do not feel have been adequately covered in the works that have come before this one. This book shines in areas of technique and the fine points of very high-level practice. However, the spiritual life is vast beyond measure and cannot possibly be adequately covered in a single book. Thus, I will often refer you to other excellent sources for more details on those topics that I feel have already been covered quite well by other authors. I strongly suggest checking out at least some if not all of these other sources.

Like my own practice, this book is heavily influenced by the teachings of the late, great Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese meditation master and scholar in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, and by those in his lineage and outside it. There are numerous references to other excellent traditions as well, some Buddhist and some not. It is my sincere wish that all diligent students of meditation find something in this book that is of practical value to them.

I have included a few of my own experiences and labeled them as such. This is done to try to add some sense of the reality of what is possible, both in terms of successes and failures. They should add a human dimension to the theory. However, if you find that these stories get in the way, or if they seem to have too much of the quality of "let me tell you about my personal spiritual quest," please do us both a favor and skip over them without a second thought.

I have also written this book in what is clearly my own voice. Those who have read this work who know me tell me that they can

me saying it. I have also left in a lot of my neurotic stuff and made it as obvious as I can. I will assert that anyone who writes puts their stuff in there even if they try to hide it, so at least you should be able to see it clearly rather than it being hidden and covert. If you want a book that is just the straight dogma and theory without this sort of voice, there are lots to choose from and I will mention a number along the way.

I have also included a modicum of social commentary, some of which has a definite bite to it. Some of you may not find it helpful, or even find it quite distasteful and offensive. Some of you will quickly dismiss it as harsh or wrong speech. I am torn between the feeling that there really are some important points in those sections and the understanding that not everyone will be able to make good use of information and opinions presented in such strong terms. Thus, I ask you to please skip over those chapters and get to the friendlier or more technical sections beyond them if you don't find them helpful. To facilitate doing so, I have included a star (asterisk) in the titles of those chapters that contain potentially inflammatory material so that they may be treated appropriately.

While I feel that the points made in those chapters are important and potentially quite valid and useful, they are not absolutely necessary for understanding the chapters that follow them. The world is brimming with very nice and friendly dharma books. There are hundreds available on the shelves of any mega-bookstore. However, I believe that there is room for a book that sometimes conveys its message in a very different voice, though I respectfully give you the option to choose how much of that voice you want to hear. It is the unrestrained voice of one from a generation whose radicals wore spikes and combat boots rather than beads and sandals, listened to the Sex Pistols rather than the Moody Blues, wouldn't know a beat poet or early '60s dharma bum from a hole in the ground, and thought the hippies were pretty friggin' naïve, not that we don't owe them a lot. It is also the unrestrained voice of one whose practice has been dedicated to complete and unexcelled mastery of the traditional and hardcore stages of the path rather than some sort of vapid New Age fluff or pop psychological head-trip. If that ain't you, consider reading something else.

As a highly regarded senior meditation teacher and scholar (who will remain anonymous) said to me after skimming through an earlier draft of this book, "Most Buddhists are just aging Boomers who want

to do something to feel better about themselves as they get older and are not really interested in this sort of thing." I wish them great success in getting those valid needs met and so I must reluctantly advise such individuals to avoid reading this book or at least the chapters marked with a star.

This is simultaneously an admission of the limitations of this work, an invitation to adopt a more empowering view of what is possible on the spiritual path, and a warning.

I have had other motivations for writing this book. A number of people have attempted to have me be their meditation teacher. I have done what I can to encourage them to practice well, go on retreats and explore, but as soon as I get the sense that they are not into really doing the work or are trying to idolize me in even small ways, I go out of my way to alienate them completely. I greatly prefer the company of fellow adventurers who wish to explore the mysteries of this life together than any other sort of relationship. Dharma friends may be at different stages in the practice and one friend may teach another something useful, but this has a very different feel from people who are formally teacher and student. Thus, writing this book allows me to hand them the better part of what I know and say, "Here, if you are really into it, there is more than enough here to allow you to plunge as deep as you care to. If not, I have wasted little of my time and can avoid being put on some strange pedestal or pillory, at least to my face."

That said, I do have the explicit goal of facilitating others to become living masters of this material that they may go forth and help to encourage more people to do so. The more people are able to teach from a place of deeply established personal experience, the more people will be able to learn the dharma well, and the saner and happier the world will be.

This brings me to the question of the issue of what some would call hierarchy. The simple fact is that there are those that have attained to what is called awakening, enlightenment, realization, etc. and those that haven't. There are those with strong concentration abilities and those those without. There are those who have their morality trip together and viii

those that don't. There are those who are masters of some things and those that have more work to do. While there is a strangely pervasive movement in the West to try to imagine everyone is equal in the world of spirituality, it is obviously completely delusional and wrong-headed.

When I went looking for teachers and friends to practice with and help me along, rather than get mad that some people claimed to know

more than I did, I was excited by the opportunity, however rare, to study with people who knew what they were doing. This just makes sense. Read this as another warning: if you get good enough at these things, people will often have bad reactions to you if you go around talking about it, and the number who will instead find your achievements a source of inspiration and empowerment, as they rightly should, will likely be few.

On that same front, it is a very strange thing to have such a completely different language, set of experiences and perspectives from most of the people around me. I can often feel like an alien wearing a trench coat of normalcy, and I dream of a world where conversations about the sorts of events and insights that have come to dominate my everyday experience are much more common and normal. Reading between the lines, you should take this admission as yet another warning. If you get way into this stuff, you will discover this same loneliness.

I should also mention that I consider myself and many of those who hail from the lineages from which I primarily draw to be dharma cowboys, mavericks, rogues, and outsiders. Really wanting to get somewhere is a sure ticket to feeling this way in most Western Buddhist circles. What is ironic is that I also see myself as an extreme traditionalist. The strange thing is that these days to be a Buddhist traditionalist, one who really tries to plunge the depths of the heart, mind and body as the Buddha so clearly admonished his followers to do, is to fly in the face of much of mainstream meditation culture.

In that same vein, I should further mention that the path I have followed has been dangerous, destabilizing more often than calm, excruciating more often than pleasant, harder to integrate than most other dharma paths I have heard of, and in general quite a rough ride. It has also been profound, amazing, and more glorious than most other paths I have heard tell of. Surfing the ragged edges of reality has been ix

Foreword and Warning

easier for me than slowing the thing down. In my explorations, accidents and adventures, I have learned a lot about not only how to make very fast progress in meditation but also a lot about how to do so without completely wiping out. I hope that I can pass on some of the knowledge of both in this book. This should be seen as another warning. This book and the path presented in it are not for the damaged and unstable spiritual seeker. You have to have your psychological trip fairly together to be able to handle the intense techniques, side effects and results I am about to discuss.

I would like to thank the very many people whose influence,

friendship, support and kindness went into making this work

what it is, though they are way too numerous to list here. This is an

interdependent universe, and so to write that this work is simply by me is not in accord with reality. It would be absurd not to acknowledge the extensive support of Carol Ingram, Sonja Boorman, David Ingram, Christina Jones, Christopher Titmuss, Sharda Rogell, Bill Hamilton, Kenneth Folk and Robert Burns, all of who were very instrumental in making what is good in this book and my own practice possible. I would also like to thank John Hawley, Roger Windsor, Daniel Rizzuto and Michael Wade for all their help with editing. However, the

responsibility for any flaws this work may contain must fall squarely on me. I can't be sure that all of these fine people would even want their names associated with this work, but I reserve the right to express my deep gratitude nonetheless.

A brief note on style… The English language has no great way to use pronouns that refer to a single person without getting gender-specific.

Various solutions exist, such as constantly using "he/she" (which can be very distracting), alternating between "he" and "she", and recasting sentences in the plural, where the pronoun "they" may be used. For better or for worse, I am going to use the pronoun "they" to mean

"he/she," thus using what is ordinarily a plural pronoun with verbs in the singular. I am not particularly thrilled with this solution, but I don't think it is much worse than the others. Should a reader disagree, I hope that he/she will find a way to forgive me, or at least that she will understand the problem, making room in his heart for one more author struggling with this linguistic limitation. I must also admit that I am x

somewhat erratic in my use of capital letters, and you may just have to Live With It.

May this work be for the benefit of all beings. May you realize what you are truly looking for, pursue it relentlessly despite all obstacles, and find it.

PART I: THE FUNDAMENTALS

1.INTRODUCTION TO PART I

If you didn't read the Foreword and Warning, do so now.

The Buddhist path has often been called a "spiritual path," and this use of religious language can be very inspiring for some people. The Buddhist path could also be thought in terms of a scientific experiment, a set of exercises that the Buddha and those who have

followed him have claimed lead to very specific effects, effects that they deemed worthwhile. Using this sort of practical language can also be very inspiring for some people. In an attempt to inspire a wide audience, I will use both spiritual and practical or technical language when discussing these issues. However, my preference is generally for the practical language. You could throw out all of the spiritual trappings on the Buddhist path and still have a set of basic practices that lead to the effects promised. You could also keep all of the spiritual trappings, do the basic practices, and produce the same results, assuming of course that you had the extra time and resources necessary to do both.

Part I contains some traditional lists that were taught by the Buddha and relate directly to spiritual training. They make important and practical points in very concise ways. These teachings were made compact and portable on purpose so that people could remember them and use them. It is their very simplicity that makes them so practical and down to earth.

I, however, am going to take these very compact teachings and go on and on about them. It turns out that the Buddha sometimes made things so simple that we are left wondering what the heck he was talking about and how to do something useful with his teachings. Basically he was saying, “Get to know your actual reality really, really, really well, and try to do right by yourself and the world.” As we all know, this is not always as easy as it sounds, so that is why I include all of the additional commentary.

Thus, these teachings are designed to help people get in touch with their reality in some way that makes a difference. They can also help people avoid some of the common pitfalls on the spiritual path and in life in general, some of which I will talk about later.

To that end, we will begin with an introduction to the Three Trainings, morality , conce ntratio n and wisdom . The Three

Introduction to Part I

Trainings encompass the sum total of the Buddhist path. Thus, they will be used as the framework for this book. The Three Trainings involve skills that we consciously and explicitly try to master. Each training has its own specific set of assumptions, agendas, practices, and standards for success in those practices. These are actually fairly different from each other, and all sorts of problems can arise if we mix these up and use the assumptions of one training when pursuing the others. Each training also has its common pitfalls, limitations, and shadow sides. These are rarely made clear, and the failure to do so has caused much confusion.

Thus, I will do my best to make them clear, particularly in Part II (Light and Shadows). Each training also has specific standards for

success and mastery. These can sometimes seem a bit technical, particularly the maps of the high concentration states and the stages of insight, so I will wait until Part III (Mastery) to present these in order to keep Part I focused on the basic frameworks and practices that make the whole thing possible in the first place.

While I think that each part of this book contributes to the whole, there are reasons why you might want to skip to certain sections first and fill in the rest later. For instance, if you are having powerful visions or Kundalini experiences, you might want to read the first few chapters of Part III and then go back and read the rest. If you are simply interested in the maps of the stages of insight, go straight to the chapter called The Progress of Insight. If you just want to get right to some core insight practices, read the chapters on The Three Characteristics and The Seven Factors of Enlightenment. Should you be in a mood for some scathing social commentary, the beginning of Part II is for you. If you just want to hear my take on enlightenment, then Models of the Stages of Enlightenment might be a good place to start. I struggled for a long time debating whether to present the maps that tell what these practices lead to at the beginning or at the end of the book. I have included them last, but you might be the sort who wants to see them first, and if so you should read the chapter called The Three Characteristics and then skip straight to Part III. In my ideal world, everyone would read through this book two or three times cover-to-cover and then work on committing the more important sections to memory.

3

2.MORALITY, THE FIRST AND LAST TRAINING

The original Pali word for this training is sila, which I am translating as “morality.” People translate it in various ways, with some other possibilities being “virtue” and “decency.” Regardless of the word we choose, it is likely to have both positive and negative implications. If the word “morality” bothers you due to the associations that it brings to mind, take a look at the assumptions, agendas, and practices of this training and come up with your own word for it. I don’t think that it is so important what we call it. I do, however, think that we should give some attention to trying to live it.

From my point of view, training in morality has as its domain all of the ordinary ways that we live in the world. When we are trying to live the good life in a conventional sense, we are working on training in morality. When we are trying to work on our emotional, psychological and physical health, we are working at the level of training in morality.

When we philosophize, we are working on training in morality. When we exercise, we are working on training in morality. When we

try to take care of ourselves or others, we are working on training in morality.

When we try to defend the environment, reform the government, or make this world a better place, we are working on training in morality.

When we try to find a good and helpful job, try to build a healthy marriage or raise healthy children, or shave our heads and move to a remote desert, we are working on training in morality. Whatever we do in the ordinary world that we think will be of some benefit to others or ourselves is an aspect of working on this first training.

The second two trainings, those having to do with attaining unusual states of mind and those having to do with ultimate realizations, have limits, in that we can master them absolutely. However, this cannot be said of the first training. There is no limit to the degree of skill that can be brought to how we live in the world. Thus, morality is also the last training, the training that we will have to work on for all of our life. We may be able to attain to astounding states of consciousness and understand the true nature of reality, but what people see and what is causal are the ways that these abilities and understandings translate into how we live in the world.

Morality, The First and Last TrainingMorality, The First and Last Training

There are basic assumptions that are extremely helpful when

undertaking training in morality. It is very helpful to assume that some sort of basic moral code is helpful for getting along in this world, and thus that there is some practical benefit to be derived from training in morality.

It is also helpful to assume in some loose and non-dogmatic way that the more good we do in the world, the more good there will be in that world, and thus the more good things will happen to us and all other beings. It is also worth assuming the corollary of this, that the more we do bad things in the world, the more bad things will be in that world for us and for all beings. These assumptions are not unique to Buddhism nor are they in any way extraordinary. Societies and traditions throughout the ages have advocated that we find a place in our life for these assumptions. Realize that defining bad and good is often very much a question of perspective, but don't fall into the paralyzing trap of imagining that it is useless to try anyway. It is better to try to do your best and fail than not try at all.

Thus, we are assuming that what we think, say and do have

consequences. When undertaking training in morality, we are assuming that we can control what we think, say and do, thus creating consequences that are beneficial. Rather than accepting our current level of intellectual, emotional and psychological development as

being beyond our power to change, we consciously and explicitly take the empowering view that we can work with these aspects of our lives and change them for the better. We assume that we can change our world and our attitudes towards our world. We take responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

Further, as a part of our empowerment, we assume that the more of our resources and abilities we bring to this training, the likelier we will be to succeed. We have a body, we have reason, we have our intuition, we have our heart, and we have ability to learn and remember. We have a community of others with wisdom to share, we have books and other media that contain advice for living the good life, and we have our friends and family. We can draw on all of this and more to try to live a good life, a life where our thoughts, words and deeds reflect as closely as possible the standards we have consciously adopted and defined for 5

ourselves. The more consciously engaged we are with our task, the more we are likely to be successful.

Crucial to the control of what happens in our lives is our intent.

Thus, training in morality places a lot of emphasis on intent, with the basic assumption being that the more our intentions are kind and compassionate, the more we are likely to be able to manifest kind and compassionate thoughts, words and deeds.

Further, it is helpful to assume that training in morality requires us to pay attention to what is happening in our lives. When we are not paying attention to what we are thinking, saying and doing, we will not easily be able to craft these in a way that fits with the assumptions of this training. If we are not paying attention to what the consequences of our thoughts, words and deeds are, both in the short term and the long term, we are unlikely to be able to gain enough experience to be able to guide our training in morality successfully.

It is also helpful to assume that training in morality will help us when we get to formal meditation practices (the next two trainings in concentration and wisdom), providing a foundation of good mental and physical habits that can support those practices. Thus, even if we have little interest in being moral because of the benefits it can bring, if we are interested in obtaining the results of the other two trainings, we should also engage in training in morality.

These assumptions naturally lead to the specific agendas we have for what happens when undertaking training in morality. We consciously aspire to have the actions of our body, speech and mind live in a way that fits with the assumptions of this training. In short, we have standards for our mental, emotional and physical lives and

we try our best to live up to those standards. When we are working on training in morality, we consciously cultivate actions, words and thoughts that we deem to be kind and compassionate. By “kind,” I mean that we work to promote the happiness and welfare of ourselves and others. By “compassionate,”

I mean that we work to relieve the suffering of ourselves and others.

Thus, our agenda is for our intentions to be kind and compassionate, for our minds to be aware of what we are thinking, saying, and doing, and for our experience to tell us as best it can how to craft our life to reflect our intentions.

6

Morality, The First and Last TrainingMorality, The First and Last Training

Training in morality tends to be discussed in terms of what one shouldn’t do and also what one should do. The standard Buddhist short-list of the five things that one should try to avoid, called “The Five Precepts” are: killing, stealing, lying, taking mind altering substances that lead to heedlessness, and using sexual energy in ways that are harmful.

These are obviously not unique to Buddhism, and seem to be part of the basic set of standards for behavior that societies and cultures throughout the ages have found to be helpful and practical. The standard list of things that one should try to do includes being kind, compassionate and appreciative of the successes of others.

Wrestling with the question of how we can meet this fairly

reasonable standard and yet honor where we are and what is going on around us is the practice of this first training. We will make all kinds of mistakes that can be very educational when trying to work on this first training; if you mess up, remember to be kind to yourself!

There are many great techniques for cultivating a more decent way of being in the world, but there are no magic formulations. You must figure out how to be kind to yourself and all beings in each moment. As training in morality takes into account all of the ordinary ways in which we try to live a good and useful life, it is so vast a subject that I couldn’t possibly give anything resembling a comprehensive treatment of it here.

However, if you wish for further elaboration on some of the basics of training in morality, I suggest that you check out some of the following works:

For a

Future to be Possible , by Thich Nhat Hanh

A Heart as

Wide as the World and Lovingkindness, the
Revolutionary Art of Happiness, both by Sharon Salzburg
Light

on Enlightenment , by Christopher Titmuss
A P

ath With Heart , by Jack Kornfield

Training in morality at its best is grounded in a theoretical or direct appreciation of one more assumption, that of interconnectedness.

Interconnectedness at this level means an appreciation of the fact that we are all in this together and that we all share the wish to be happy.

When we take into consideration our own needs and the needs of those around us, we are more likely to be naturally kind and considerate of ourselves and others. Thus, we try to make it a habit to try to take into 7

account the feelings, opinions and welfare of those around us. The obvious trap here is to simultaneously fail to take into account our own needs. Work on balancing both in a way that is sustainable and healthy.

There are countless other pitfalls we can run into when training in morality, as it is such a vast area of work. I will spend a lot of time in Part II detailing some of the more common side effects and shadow sides of training in morality, but realize that it is an endless subject.

However, one pitfall that must be addressed here, as it is so common, is that of guilt. We have grown up in a culture in which we can be extremely hard on ourselves, causing ourselves astounding amounts of pain to little good effect. If we can learn to substitute wise remorse, a remorse that simply says, “Well, that didn’t work, and this is unfortunate. I should try my best to figure out why and hopefully do something better next time,” we will be much more able to train successfully in living a good and useful life.

Some people unfortunately seem to think that the primary message of training in morality is that they should continuously cultivate the feeling that they have taken up a heavy yoke of responsibility and self-oppression. In fact, some people seem to revel in that unfortunate feeling. Those more fortunate will think, “It is so much fun to try to live a good, healthy and useful life! What a joy it is to find creative ways to do this!” There are few things more helpful on

the spiritual path and life in general than a positive attitude.

Thus, the related and all too common pitfall is that people stop having fun and trying to be successful in worldly terms. There is absolutely no reason for this. If you can have fun in healthy ways, have fun! It's not just for breakfast anymore. Also, success is highly recommended for obvious reasons. Pick a flexible vision of success in the ordinary sense for yourself and go for it! Play to win. This is your life, so make it a great one. There is no reason not to try, so long as you can do so in a kind and compassionate way.

One more great thing about the first training is that it really helps with the next training: concentration. So, here's a tip: if you are finding it hard to concentrate because your mind is filled with guilt, judgment, envy or some other hard and difficult thought pattern, also work on the first training, kindness. It will be time well spent.

3.CONCENTRATION, THE SECOND TRAINING

On to concentration, the ability to steady the mind on whatever you wish and attain unusual and profound altered states of consciousness.

Training in concentration relates to formal meditation practice. It is also called training in "samadhi" (meaning depths of meditation), or sometimes "samatha practice." Concentration practice involves working at a level that might be considered unusual, particularly contrasted with the ordinary level of training in morality. Training in morality is something to which everyone can relate. Training in concentration is only easy to relate to if you have attained to unusual states of consciousness or at least have faith that they can be attained.

Training in concentration has had thousands of pages dedicated to it, and there are probably thousands of concentration exercises. Some very commonly used objects of meditation are the breath (my personal favorite), one's posture, a mantra or koan, a candle flame, various visualization exercises, and even the experience of concentration itself.

The object you choose should be one on which you would be happy to steady your mind.

The essential point about meditation is this: to get anywhere in meditation you need to be able to really steady the mind and be present.

That's just all there is to it and it is largely a question of just doing it.

There is an important shift that happens in people's practice when they really make the commitment to developing concentration and follow through with it. Until one does this, not much is likely to happen in one's meditative practice! If you decide to do a

concentration practice, stay on that object like a rabid dog until you have enough stability and skill to let the mind rest on it naturally.

The first formal goal when training in concentration is to attain something called “access concentration,” meaning the ability to stay consistently with your chosen object with relative ease to the general exclusion of distractions. This is the basic attainment that allows you to access the higher stages of concentration and also to begin the path of insight (the third training), so make attaining access concentration your first goal in your meditative practice. You will know when you have it.

So, the essential formal concentration practice instructions are: pick an object (the list above is a great place to begin), find a place to practice

Concentration, The Second TrainingMorality, The First and Last Training

where you are as free from distractions as possible, pick a sustainable posture (it doesn’t really matter so much), focus your attention on the object as completely and consistently as possible for the duration of that practice period, allowing as few lapses in concentration as possible, and learn to stabilize all of your attention on that object. The more you practice and the better your practice, the better you will become. Find the balance of effort and steadiness that works for you. Practice again and again until you can attain access concentration. While this paragraph may seem trite or sparse, it contains the formal instructions on how to begin training in concentration.

Should you need someone to tell you how long to practice, start with 10 minutes a day and work up to an hour or two each day as your life allows. If you can learn to hold your attention completely on your chosen object for even one solid minute, you have some strong concentration skills. That said, you might have 10 hours a day to devote to practice. Don’t let me hold you back! How long it will take you to develop access concentration is dependent upon a number of factors including practice conditions, your natural and cultivated concentration ability, the strength of your drive to succeed, and how much you practice.

Sharpening your concentration may help almost everything you do, and can provide a mental and emotional stability that can be very useful.

Concentration can also lead to some very nice states called “jhanas” and other names. These can be extremely blissful and peaceful. Being able to access these states of mind can be ridiculously enjoyable and can increase steadiness and stability of mind. These are of value in and of themselves and also serve the important function in

the Buddhist tradition of providing a disposable foundation for insight practices, i.e.

the third training.

I will leave off describing the high concentration attainments until Part III so as to keep this section focused on the essential skills necessary for meditation, as once you gain access concentration getting into those states is very easy. Until you can get into access concentration, you ain't got squat. Thus, pick an object, practice well and often, learn to attain to access concentration, finish reading this book, and by that point everything should be very straightforward.

10

Concentration, The Second TrainingMorality, The First and Last Training

Now, it must be said that concentration practices, like all practices, have their shadow sides. For instance, high and unusual experiences can become addictive and seductive, causing them to receive more attention and focus than they deserve. They can also lead to people becoming very otherworldly and ungrounded, very much the way that

hallucinogens can. They can also bring up lots of our psychological

"stuff." This last limitation could be a benefit if we are in a mood to deal with this stuff. Perhaps the most important limitations of concentration practices is that they do not lead directly to the insights and permanent understandings that come from training in wisdom, as much as we might like them to. That brings us to the third training…

11

4.WISDOM, THE THIRD TRAINING

The third training in the list is wisdom, in this case a very special kind of wisdom that I will often call "ultimate" or "fundamental"

wisdom. This may also be rendered as "understanding" or "insight."

The whole trick to this training is to understand the truth of the sensations that make up our present experience. The great mystics from all traditions have reported that there is something remarkable and even enlightening about our ordinary experiences if we take the time to look into them very carefully. Those that undertake training in wisdom have decided to do the experiment and see for themselves if this is true or if those old dead dudes were just making it all up.

Obviously, the first assumption that must be made is that there is some understanding that is completely beyond any ordinary

understanding, even beyond the altered states of consciousness that can be attained if we train in concentration. The next assumption is that there are specific practices that can lead to that understanding

if we simply do them. The third and perhaps most vital assumption is that we can do them and be successful.

The assumption that is rarely stated explicitly but often implied is that we must be willing to stay on a sensate level, at the level of the actual sensations that make up experiences, if we wish to gain the insights that are promised by the mystics. The corollary of this assumption is that we must be willing to set aside periods of time during which we abandon the ordinary way of working in the world that is called training in morality and even the unusual way of working with altered states of consciousness that is called training in concentration.

We assume that the teachings on wisdom point to universal truths, truths that can be perceived in all types of experience without exception.

We assume that if we can simply know our sensate experience clearly enough, then we will come to understand for ourselves.

The primary agenda for doing insight practices is to increase our perceptual abilities so that the truths mentioned by the great mystics become obvious to us. Thus, rather than caring what we think, say or do, or caring about what altered state of consciousness we are in, when training in wisdom we actively work to simply increase the speed, precision, consistency and inclusiveness of our experience of all the

Wisdom, The Third Training

quick little sensations that make up our experience, whatever and however they may be.

Thus, the esse

ntial formal insight meditation instructions are : find a

place where the distractions are tolerable, pick a stable and sustainable posture, and for a defined period of time notice every single sensation that makes up your reality as best you can. Just as with concentration practices, more time and more diligent practice pays off. These simple instructions can easily seem overwhelming, vague or strangely trivial to many people, and so I am going to spend a lot of time laying out a large number of empowering concepts and more structured practices that have helped countless practitioners over thousands of years to follow these basic instructions.

While the Three Trainings all contain some similar elements, there are some important contrasts that must be made between them. The gold standard for training in morality is how kind and compassionate our intentions are and how well we lead a useful and moral life. The gold standard for training in concentration practices is how quickly we can enter into highly altered states of consciousness,

how long we can stay in them, and how refined, complete and stable we can make those states. The gold standard for insight practices is that we can quickly and consistently see the true nature of the numerous quick sensations that make up our whole reality, regardless of what those sensations are, allowing us to cut to a level of understanding that goes utterly beyond specific conditions.

It is absolutely vital that the differences between these gold standards be understood. Considered this way, these gold standards do not overlap and may even seem to contradict one another. This is a very practical assumption. As these differences seem to be extremely difficult to explain clearly, I will make this basic point again and again throughout this book.

So, having gained enough morality to be temporarily free of

excessive negative mind states and enough concentration to steady the mind somewhat, look into the bare truth of the sensations of this moment. This is called insight meditation and other names, and it is designed to produce wisdom.

13

Wisdom, The Third Training

Sounds simple, and while it is, it also isn't. There are many types of insight that we may derive from experiencing the world. Usually, we might think of training in wisdom as having to do with relative issues like how to live our lives. In this sense, one might just try to be wiser.

Perhaps we could skillfully reflect on something that went badly and see if perhaps in the future some wisdom gained from that experience might change the way we live our life. This is an ordinary form of wisdom, and so the insights we derive from such reflections and observations are insights into the ordinary world.

On the other hand, these sorts of reflections can only take us so far, and to really get what the Buddha was talking about, we need to go far beyond these conventional definitions of wisdom and attain to ultimate insights by doing insight practices. Many people try to make insight practices into an exercise that will produce both insights into the ordinary world and also ultimate insights. I have come to the conclusion that we should not count on ultimate teachings to illuminate our relative issues or vice versa, and so I feel that it is extremely important to keep the relative and ultimate wisdom teachings separate. Failure to do so causes endless problems and makes progress on either front more difficult rather than easier. Thus, I will revisit this topic again and again throughout this work, doing my best to clearly differentiate those practices that produce ordinary wisdom from those practices that fall within the third training and lead to ultimate realizations that are independent of our relative

insights.

There are many wisdom traditions and many styles of insight

practices. I will lay out a number of them explicitly and hint at many others in the chapters that follow. When choosing an insight tradition, I would suggest you look for a tradition that is tried and true, meaning that is either very old and well tested, or at least can, in modern times, demonstrate that it consistently leads to unshakable realizations. I can verify that the specific practices I will present lead to the effects I promise if they are applied as recommended. Even better, you should verify this for yourself.

A brief note of caution here: occasionally, when people begin to really get into spirituality, they may get a bit fascinated with it and may forget some of the useful relative wisdom they have learned from

before. Caught up in “ultimate wisdom” and their “spiritual quest,” they can sometimes abandon conventional wisdom and other aspects of their

“former life” to a degree that may not be very wise. They falsely imagine that by training in insight they are also mastering or transcending the first training, that of living in the ordinary world. We awaken to the actual truth of our life in all of its conventional aspects by definition, so make sure that yours is a life you will want to wake up to.

In summary, by seeing deeply into the truth of our own experience, profound and beneficial transformations of consciousness are definitely possible. You guessed it, we’re talking about enlightenment, The Big E, awakening, freedom, Nirvana, the unconditioned, and all of that. The arising of this understanding is the primary focus of this book. There are actually lots of interesting insights that typically occur even before awakening. Again, there are no magic formulae for producing ultimate insights, except for the Three Characteristics...

5.THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

The Three Characteristics are so central to the teachings of the Buddha that it is almost inconceivable how little attention the vast majority of so-called insight meditators pay to them. They are impermane nce , un satisfactori nes s, and no- self . I cannot possibly stress enough the usefulness of trying again and again to really understand these three qualities of all experience. They are the stuff from which ultimate insight at all levels comes, pure and simple. They are the marks of ultimate reality. Every single time I say, “understand the true nature of things,” what I mean is, “understand the Three

Characteristics." To really understand them is to be enlightened.

Somehow this exceedingly important message just doesn't typically seem to get through to insight meditators, and thus they spend so much time doing anything but looking precisely moment to moment into the Three Characteristics. They may be thinking about something, lost in the stories and tape loops of the mind, trying to work on their stuff, philosophizing, trying to quiet the mind, or who knows what, and this can go on for year after year, retreat after retreat, and of course they wonder why they don't have more insight yet. This is a tragedy of monumental proportions, but you do not have to be part of it! You can be one of those insight meditators that knows what to do, does it, and finally "gets it" in the grandest sense.

The big message here is: drop the stories, find a physical object like the breath or body or pain or pleasure or whatever, and look into the Three Characteristics precisely and consistently! Drop to the level of bare sensations! This is vipassana, insight meditation, or whatever you want to call it. It is the way of the Buddhas. All the "opening to it," "just being with it," "letting it go" and all of that are quite important, as we will see later, but insight meditators must, repeat, must, look into the following:

IMPERMANENCE

All things are impermane

nt . This is one of the most

fundamental teachings of the Buddha and the second to last sentence he uttered before he died: "All phenomena are impermanent! Work out your salvation with diligence!" In his last words, he said everything you

The Three Characteristics

need to know to do insight practices. Things come and go. Nothing lasts for even an instant! Absolute transience is truly the fundamental nature of experiential reality.

What do I mean by "experiential reality?" I mean the universe of sensations that you actually experience. There are many gold standards for reality. However, when doing insight practices, the only useful gold standard for reality is your own sensate experience. From the conventional point of view, things are usually thought to be there even when you can no longer experience them, and are thus assumed with only circumstantial evidence to be somewhat stable entities.

Predictability is used to assume continuity of existence. For our day-today lives, this assumption is adequate and often very useful.

For example, you could close your eyes, put down this book, and then pick it up again where you left it without opening your eyes. From a pragmatic point of view, this book was where you left it even when you were not experiencing it in any way. However, when doing

insight practices, it just happens to be much more useful to assume that things are only there when you experience them and not there when you don't. Thus, the gold standard for reality when doing insight practices is the sensations that make up your reality in that instant. Sensations not there at that time do not exist, and thus only the sensations arising in that instant do exist. In short, the vast majority of what you usually think of as making up your universe doesn't exist the vast majority of the time, from a pure sensate point of view. This is exactly, precisely and specifically the point. Knowing this directly leads to freedom.

It is wise to reflect on death and all of that, for it is useful and true.

This is a reflection on ordinary reality and thus an aspect of training in morality that is commonly used to develop motivation to train in insight.

Far better to see one sensation arise and pass away. What do I mean by this? I mean that sensations arise out of nothing, do their thing, and vanish utterly. Gone. Utterly gone. Then the next sensation arises, does its thing, and disappears completely. "That's the stuff of modern physics," one might say. "What does that have to do with practice?"

It has everything to do with practice! We can experience this, because the first set of vibrations we have access to isn't actually that fast.

Vibrations. That's right, vibrations. That's what this first characteristic 17

The Three Characteristics

means: that reality vibrates, pulses, appears as discrete particles, is like TV snow, the frames of a movie, a shower of vanishing flower petals, or however you want to say it. Some people can get all into complex wave or particle models here, but don't. Just look into your actual experience, especially something nice and physical like the motion and sensations of the breath in the abdomen, the sensations of the tips of the fingers, the lips, the bridge of the nose, or whatever. Instant by instant try to know when the actual physical sensations are there and when they aren't. It turns out they aren't there a good bit of the time, and even when they are there, they are changing constantly.

We are typically quite sloppy about what are physical sensations and what are mental sensations (memories, mental images, and mental impressions of other sensations). These two kinds of sensations actually oscillate back and forth, a back and forth interplay, one arising and passing and then the other arising and passing, in a somewhat quick but quite penetrable fashion. Being clear about exactly when the physical sensations are there will begin to clarify

their slippery counterpart that helps create the illusion of continuity or solidity: flickering mental impressions.

Coming directly after a physical sensation arises and passes is a separate pulse of reality that is the mental knowing of that physical sensation, here referred to as “consciousness” (as contrasted with

“awareness” in Part III). By physical sensations I mean the five senses of touch, taste, hearing, seeing, and smelling. This is the way the mind operates on phenomena that are no longer there, even thoughts, intentions and mental images.

Since I just used this dangerous phrase “the mind,” I should quickly mention that it cannot be found. I’m certainly not talking about the brain, which we have never experienced, as the standard for insight practices is what we can directly experience. As an old Zen monk once said to us in his extremely thick Japanese accent, “Some people say there is mind. I say there is no mind, but never mind. Heh, heh, heh!”

However, I will use this dangerous phrase “the mind” often, or even worse “our mind,” but think to yourself when you read it, “He’s just using conventional language, but really there are just utterly transient mental sensations. Truly, there is no stable entity called ‘the mind’

which can be found! By doing insight practices, I will fully understand this!” If you are able to do this, we’ll get along just fine.

This mental impression of a previous sensation (often called

“consciousness” in Buddhist parlance) is like an echo, a resonance. The mind takes a crude impression of the object, and that is what we can think about, remember and process. Then there may be a thought or an image that arises and passes, and then, if the mind is stable, another physical pulse.

Each one of these arises and vanishes completely before the other begins, so it is extremely possible to sort out which is which with a stable mind dedicated to consistent precision and to not being lost in stories.

This means that the instant you have experienced something, you know that it isn't there any more, and whatever is there is a new sensation that will be gone in an instant. There are typically many other impermanent sensations and impressions interspersed with these, but, for the sake of practice, this is close enough to what is happening to be a good working model.

Engage with the preceding paragraphs. They are the stuff upon which great insight practice is based. Given that you know sensations are vibrating, pulsing in and out of reality, and that, for the sake of

practice, every sensation is followed directly by a mental impression, you now know exactly what you are looking for. You have a clear standard. If you are not experiencing it, then stabilize the mind further, and be clearer about exactly when and where there are physical sensations. Spend time with this, as long as it takes. The whole goal is to experience impermanence directly, i.e. things flickering, and what those things are doesn't actually matter one bit!

How freeing! Interpretation is particularly useless in insight meditation, so you don't have to spend time doing it when you are on the cushion. Throughout this book I recommend reflecting on spiritual teachings and how to bring them to bear on our life, but not on the cushion. Thoughts, even supposedly good ones, are just too slippery and seductive most of the time, even for advanced meditators, though if you can avoid getting lost in their content they are as valid a stream of objects as any other. Try to limit yourself to a few minutes of reflection 19

The Three Characteristics

per hour of meditation. This should be more than enough. There are simply no substitutes for this sort of momentum in practice.

How fast are things vibrating? How many sensations arise and vanish each second? This is exactly what you are trying to experience, but some very general guidelines can provide faith that it can be done and perhaps point the way as well. Begin by assuming that we are talking about one to ten times per second in the beginning. This is not actually that fast. Try tapping five to ten times per second on a table or something. It might take two hands, but it's manageable, isn't it? You could obviously experience that, couldn't you? That's the spirit!

There are faster and slower vibrations that may show up, some very fast (maybe up to forty times per second) and some very slow (that are actually made up of faster vibrations), but let's just say that one to ten times per second can sometimes be a useful guideline in the beginning.

Once you get the hang of it, the faster and slower vibrations are no big deal. Alternately, depending on how you practice, conceiving of this as like a shower of raindrops, a pointillist painting in motion, or 3D TV

snow might help. Reality is obviously quite rich and complex, and thus the frequencies of the pulses of reality can be somewhat chaotic, but they actually tend to be more regular than you might expect. Also, there are not really any “magic frequencies.” Whatever frequency or pulse or whatever you are experiencing at that moment is the truth of that moment! However, in the beginning you should go for faster vibrations over slower ones and then try for wider ones over those that are narrower.

Don't worry if things look or feel solid sometimes. Just be with the solidity clearly and precisely, but not too tightly, and it can start to show its impermanence. Be aware of each exact moment in which you experience solidity and its beginning and ending. Remember that each experience of solidity is a separate, impermanent sensation! Many people begin practicing and really want to solidify something like the breath so that they can actually pay attention to it. They become frustrated when they have a hard time finding the breath or their body or whatever. The reason they can't find it is not because they are a bad meditator but because they are having direct insight into how things actually are! Unfortunately, their theory of what is supposed to happen 20

involves really perceiving something solid and stable, so they get very frustrated. You should now be able to avoid a lot of that frustration and begin to appreciate why knowing some theory is important.

It is also worth noting here that the frequency or rate of these vibrations may change often, either getting faster or slower, and that it is really worth trying to see clearly the beginning and ending of each vibration or pulse of reality. These are actually at least two different sensations! It is also useful to check out exactly what happens at the bottom, middle, and top of the breath if you are using the breath as an object, and to examine if the frequency stays stable or changes in each phase of the breath. Never assume that what you have understood is the final answer! Be alert! Explore carefully and precisely with openness and acceptance! This is the door to understanding.

One last thing about vibrations: looking into vibrations can be a lot like any other sport. It can be thought of the way we might think of surfing or playing tennis, and this sort of game-like attitude can actually help a lot. We're "out to bust some vibrations!" as a friend of mine enthusiastically put it. You don't know quite what the next return or wave is going to be like, so pay attention, keep the mind on the pulse of the sensations of your world just as you would on the wave or ball, and keep playing!

I highly recommend this sort of speed in practice not only because that is how fast we have to perceive reality in order to awaken, but also because trying to experience one to ten sensations per second is challenging and engaging. Because it is challenging and engaging, we will be less prone to getting lost in thoughts rather than doing insight practices. Our minds have the power to perceive things extremely quickly, and we actually use this power all the time to do such things as read this book. You can probably read many words per

second. If you can do this, you can certainly do insight practices.

If you can perceive one sensation per second, try for two. If you can perceive two unique sensations per second, try to perceive four. Keep increasing your perceptual threshold in this way until the illusion of continuity that binds you on the wheel of suffering shatters. In short, when doing insight practices, constantly work to perceive sensations arise and pass as quickly and accurately as you possibly can. With the 21

spirit of a racecar driver who is constantly aware of how fast the car can go and still stay on the track, you are strongly advised to stay on the cutting edge of your ability to see the impermanence of sensations quickly and accurately.

I will relate four of the many little exercises that I sometimes do that I have found useful for jump-starting and developing insight into impermanence. They will demonstrate how we can be creative in exploring our reality precisely but hopefully they will not be thought of in some sort of dogmatic way. These objects and postures are not that important, but understanding impermanence directly is.

In one of these exercises, I sit quietly in a quiet place, close my eyes, put one hand on each knee, and concentrate just on my two index fingers. Basic dharma theory tells me that it is definitely not possible to perceive both fingers simultaneously, so with this knowledge I try to see in each instant which one of the two finger's physical sensations are being perceived. Once the mind has speeded up a bit and yet become more stable, I try to perceive the arising and passing of each of these sensations. I may do this for half an hour or an hour, just staying with the sensations in my two fingers and perceiving when each sensation is and isn't there. This might sound like a lot of work, and it definitely can be until the mind settles into it. It really requires the concentration of a fast sport like table tennis. This is such an engaging exercise and requires such precision that it is easy not to be lost in thought if I am really applying myself. I have found this to be a very useful practice for developing concentration and debunking the illusion of continuity. You can pick any two aspects of your experience for this exercise, be they physical or mental. I generally use my fingers only because through experimentation I have found that it is easy for me to perceive the sensations that make them up.

In another related exercise, I do the same sort of thing, sitting quietly in a quiet place with my eyes closed, but instead I concentrate on the sensations of the front and back of my head. With the knowledge that the illusion of a separate perceiver is partially supported by one impermanent sensation incorrectly seeming to

perceive another impermanent sensation which it follows, such as the sensations in the back of the head incorrectly seeming to perceive the sensations of the 22

front of the head which they follow, I try to be really clear about these sensations and when they are and aren't there. I try to be clear if the sensations in the head are from the front or the back of the head in each instant, and then try to experience clearly the beginning and ending of each individual sensation.

This practice also requires a table tennis-like precision. Half an hour to an hour of this can be quite a workout until the mind speeds up and becomes more stable, but this sort of effort pays off. When I am engaged with this practice, there is little room to be lost in thought. I have also found this a very useful practice for developing concentration and debunking the illusion of continuity and the illusion of a separate self (more on that later).

In another exercise, which is quite common to many meditation traditions, I sit quietly in a quiet place, close my eyes, and concentrate on the breath. More than just concentrating on it, I know that the sensations that make up the concept "breath" are each impermanent, lasting only an instant. With this knowledge, I try to see how many individual times in each part of the breath I can perceive the sensations that make up the breath. During the in-breath I try to experience it as many times as possible, and try to be quite precise about exactly when the in-breath begins and ends.

More than this, I try to perceive exactly and precisely when each sensation of motion or physicality of the breath arises and passes. I then do the same for the out-breath, paying particular attention to the exact end of the out-breath and then the beginning of the new in-breath. I don't worry about how I am breathing because it is not the quality of the breath which I am concerned with or even what the sensations are, but the ultimate nature of these sensations: their impermanence, their arising and passing away. When I am really engaged with bending the mind to this exercise, there is little room to be lost in thought. I have found this to be a very useful practice for developing concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity.

In the last exercise, I take on the thoughts directly. I know that the sensations that make up thoughts can reveal the truth of the Three Characteristics to me, so I have no fear of them; instead I regard them as more glorious opportunities for insight. Again, sitting quietly in a 23

quiet place with my eyes closed, I turn the mind to the thought stream.

However, rather than paying attention to the content like I usually do, I pay attention to the ultimate nature of the numerous sensations that make up thoughts: impermanence. I may even make the thoughts in my head more and more intense just to get a good look at them.

It is absolutely essential to try to figure out how you experience thoughts, otherwise you will simply flounder in content. What do thoughts feel like? Where to they occur? How big are they? What do they look like, smell like, taste like, sound like? How long do they last?

Where are their edges? Only take on this practice if you are willing to try to work on this level, the level that tries to figure out what thoughts actually are rather than what they mean or imply.

If my thoughts are somewhat auditory, I begin by trying to perceive each syllable of the current thought and then each syllable's beginning and ending. If they are somewhat visual, I try to perceive every instant in which a mental image presents itself. If they seem somewhat physical, such as the memory of a movement or feeling, I try to perceive exactly how long each little sensation of this memory lasts. This sort of investigation can actually be fairly easy to do and yet is quite powerful.

Things can also get a bit odd quickly when doing this sort of practice, but I don't worry about that. Sometimes thoughts can begin to sound like the auditory strobing section of the song "Crimson and Clover,"

where it sounds like they are standing at a spinning microphone.

Sometimes the images in our head can begin to flash and flicker.

Sometimes our very sense of attention can begin to strobe. This is the point! The sensations that imply a mind and mental processes are discontinuous, impermanent.

Again, this practice requires steadiness and determination, as well as precision. When I am really engaged with this, there is no time to be lost in the content of the thoughts, as I am trying too hard to be clear about the beginning and ending of each little flicker, squawk and pulse which makes up thought. This can be an especially fun practice when difficult thoughts are distracting me from a physical sensation. I can turn on them, break them down into meaningless little blips, little vibrations of suchness, and then they don't have the power to cause me any trouble. They just scatter like confetti. They are seen as they are: small, 24

quick and harmless. They have a message to convey, but then they are gone.

When I am done with this exercise, I return to physical objects

and their arising and passing. However, I have found taking on the sensations that make up thoughts to be another very useful exercise for developing concentration and penetrating the illusion of continuity. It doesn't matter if they are "good thoughts" or "bad thoughts," as all mental sensations are also dripping with ultimate truth that is just waiting to be discovered, and thus I can proceed in my investigation with confidence regardless of what arises. Whether our illusions are penetrated using physical sensations or mental sensations is actually completely irrelevant.

Hopefully these exercises will give you some idea about how one might practice understanding impermanence. Impermanence is a true mark of ultimate reality, so just understanding this again and again can be sufficient to drum it into our thick heads, debunk the illusion of continuity, and once this is drummed into our thick heads we are free.

This can be a subtle business, so be patient and persevere. Remember all three trainings. Following flickering sensations and understanding the other two characteristics of suffering and no-self that they manifest can be a powerful and direct cause for deep insights and awakenings.

For five years of my practice I was basically a One Technique Freak, and that technique was noticing how sensations flicker. I would do it as often as I could, i.e. basically whenever I didn't have to be doing something that required concentration on the specifics of my life. I would be riding an elevator, just trying to see when I could feel each foot, or lying down to sleep and noticing how many times I could experience the sensations of my breath in each second. I also tried to notice this aspect of things for every single sensation that occurred during my formal practice. I used lots of objects, usually those that were presenting strongly at that time, and would use some variations on the above techniques as well as some others that I will mention shortly to keep me from getting stuck, but the aspect of my world that I tried to notice, things flickering, was always the same. I found that by making this sort of commitment to understanding one of the most basic 25

assumptions of insight practices I was able to make fast progress and gain the ultimate insights I was looking for.

SUFFERING

The next characteristic is suff ering or un satisfactori nes s.

Sounds grim or pessimistic at first, and perhaps deservedly so in one sense, but it is also a powerful statement that our moment-to-moment experience will not permanently satisfy ever. It will never happen. Why?

Because everything is impermanent, that's one reason why! I just said that nothing lasts, meaning that you can actually experience everything that you normally think of as a solid world arising and passing instant to instant. So what could last for even the blink of an eye to satisfy?

Nothing!

The point is not to be a radical, pessimistic, nihilistic cynic. The point is that it is not a thing that will help, but an understanding of something in the relationship to things. There is no thought, mind state or whatever which will do it. This is not to say that conventional day-today wisdom, such as taking care of ourselves and others, isn't also quite important: it very much is. Remember that awakening is not a thing or a mind state or a thought, it is an understanding of perspective without some separate thing that perceives.

There is a great relieving honesty in the truth of suffering. It can be very validating of the actual experience of our life and also give us the strength to look into the aspects of life that we typically try to ignore and run from. Even some deep and useful insights can be distinctly unpleasant, contrary to popular belief!

There is more to this truth, and it relates to the third characteristic, no-self. We are caught up in this bizarre habit of assuming that there is an “I.” Yet the definition of this seemingly permanent thing has to keep constantly changing to keep up the illusion in an impermanent world.

This takes up a lot of mental time and is continually frustrating to the mind, as it takes so much constant work and effort. This process is called ignorance, i.e. the illusion of an “I” and thus that everything else is “not I.”

This is the illusion of duality, and the illusion of duality is inherently painful. There is just something disconcerting about the way the mind must hold itself and the information it must work to ignore in order to 26

maintain the sense that there is a permanent and continuous self.

Maintaining it is painful and its consequences for reactive mind states are also painful. It is a subtle, chronic pain, like a vague nausea. It is a distortion of perspective that we have grown so used to that we hardly notice it most of the time. The suffering caused by continually trying to prop up the illusion of duality is fundamental suffering. This definition of suffering is the one that is most useful for insight practices.

To actually feel moment to moment this quality of reality can be hard to do, not because suffering is so hard to find (it has actually been said to be the easiest of the three to tune into), but because it

takes a certain amount of bravery. Yet, it is so well worth it. If we finally wake up to this quality of suffering we will effortlessly let it go, drop it like a hot coal that we have finally realized we were holding. It really works like that, and letting go in this way means being free.

Investigate your experience and see if you can be open to that fundamental, non-story based aspect of your bare experience that is somehow unsettling, unpleasant, or unsatisfactory. It can be found to some degree in every instant regardless of whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Once you have some mental stability, you can even look into the bare experience of the sensations that make up the stories that spin in your mind and see how unsatisfactory and unsettling it is to try to pretend they are a self or the property of some imagined self. If we continue to habituate ourselves to this understanding moment to moment we may get it into our thick heads and finally awaken.

My favorite exercise for examining suffering is to sit in a quite place with my eyes closed and examine the physical sensations that make up any sort of desire, be it desire to get something, get away from something or just tune out and go to sleep. At a rate of one to ten times per second, I try to experience exactly how I know that I wish to do something other than simply face my current experience as it is.

Moment to moment, I try to find those little uncomfortable urges and tensions that try to prod my mind into fantasizing about past or future or stopping my meditation entirely.

For that meditation period, they are my prey and nourishment, opportunities to understand something extraordinary about reality, and so I do my very best to let none of them arise and pass without the basic 27

sense of dissatisfaction in them being clearly perceived as it is. I turn on sensations of the desire to get results, turn on the pains and unsettling sensations that make my mind contract, turn on the boredom that is usually aversion to suffering in disguise, turn on the sensations of restlessness that try to get me to stop meditating. Anything with fear or judgment in it is my bread and butter for that meditation period. Any sensation that smacks of grandiosity or self-loathing is welcomed as a source of wisdom.

A half hour to an hour of this sort of consistent investigation of suffering is also quite a workout, particularly as we spend most of our lives doing anything but looking to these sorts of sensations to gain insight from them. However, I have found that this sort of investigation pays off in ways I could never have imagined.

Looking into unsatisfactoriness may not sound as concrete as the thing about vibrations, but I assure you it is. Even the most pleasant

sensations have a tinge of unsatisfactoriness to them, so look for it at the level of bare experience. Pain is a gold mine for this. I am absolutely not advocating cultivating pain, as there is already enough there. Just knowing in each precise instant how you actually know that pain is unsatisfactory can be profound practice. Don't settle for just the knee jerk answer that “of course pain is unsatisfactory.” Know exactly how you know this in each moment, but don't get lost in stories about it. This is bare reality, ultimate reality we're talking about. Just be with it, engage with it, and know it as it is at a very simple level.

NO-SELF

The last and perhaps most misunderstood of the Three

Characteristics is no- self , also rendered as egol ess nes s or emptine ss . Emptiness, for all its mysterious sounding connotations, just means that reality is empty of a permanent, separate self. The emphasis here absolutely must be on the words “permanent” and

“separate.” It doesn't mean that reality is not there, or that all of this is illusion! Solidity is an illusion, permanence is an illusion, that the watcher is a separate thing is an illusion, but all of this isn't an illusion.

Sure, all experience is utterly transient and ephemeral, but that is not quite the same as everything being an illusion. There is a habit of reading just a bit too much into things and coming out with the false

conclusion that all of this means that there is some separate, permanent us. Reality is actually fine just as it is and always has been, but there is a deeper understanding of it that is called for.

Let's talk a little bit about this concept and how the illusion of a self is created in the first place before we talk about how to use this powerful and profound concept of no-self in simple ways in practice. Some theory really can be useful to the practice, as all of it can be understood directly once one has some stability of mind and a bit of insight into what is mind and what is body, and when each is and isn't there.

We have this notion that there is really a permanent “I.” We might say, “Hello, I am...” and be quite convinced that we are talking about a permanent, separate thing that can be found. However, if we are just a bit more sophisticated we might ask, “What is this 'I' which we are sure is us?” We have grown so accustomed to the fact of the definition changing all the time that we hardly notice it, but the point of insight practice is to notice it, and to see just what it is that we are calling “I” in each moment.

We may begin with the obvious assumption: we are our body.

This sounds nice until we say something like “my body.” Well, if it is “my body,” that seems to imply that, at that moment, whatever it is that owns the body wasn't the body. Suppose someone points to our toenails.

They surely seem to be “me,” until we clip them, and then they are “not me.” Is this really the same body as when we were born? It isn't even made of the same cells, and yet it seems to be a permanent thing. Look more closely, at the sensate level, and you will see that moment to moment it isn't. At the level of actual experience, all that is found is flickering stuff. So impermanence is closely related to no-self, but there is more to no-self than that.

Perhaps thoughts are the “I.” They may seem more like the “true I”

than the body does. But they come and go to, don't they? Can we really control these thoughts? Are they something solid enough to assume that they are an “I”? Look closely and you will see that they are not. But again, no-self is more profound than this.

There also seems to be something that is frequently called “the watcher,” that which seems to be observing all this, and perhaps this is really the “I” in question. Strangely, the watcher cannot be found, can 29

it? It seems to sometimes be our eyes, but sometimes not, sometimes it seems to be images in our head and sometimes something that is separate from them and yet watching the images in our head.

Sometimes it seems to be our body, but sometimes it seems to be watching our body. Isn’t it strange how we are so used to this constant redefinition of ourselves that we never stop to question it? Question it!

This odd sense of an unfindable watcher to which all of this is happening yet which is seemingly separate from all that is happening, which sometimes seems in control of “us” and yet which sometimes seems at the mercy of reality: what is it really? What is going on here?

One of my teachers once wisely said, “If you are observing it, then it isn't you by definition!” Notice that the whole of reality seems to be observed. The hints don't get any better than this. Here are three more points of theory that are very useful for insight practices and one’s attempts to understand what is meant by no-self:

1. There are absolutely no sensations that can observe other sensations! (Notice that reality is made entirely of sensations.) 2. There are no special sensations that are uniquely in control of other sensations.

3. There are no sensations that are fundamentally split off from other sensations occurring at that moment.

To begin to unravel this mystery is to begin to awaken. Simply put, reality with a sense of a separate watcher is delusion, and unconditioned reality, reality just as it is, is awakening.

Quick point here: people can use the truth of no-self to rationalize all sorts of strange behaviors because they misunderstand it as nihilism.

“It's all illusion anyway,” they might say. It absolutely isn't. All of this can only be understood at the level that makes the difference by simple, clear, precise practice, so just keep at it.

One more related thing here that is very important: ego is a process of identification, not a thing in and of itself. It is like a bad habit, but it doesn't exist as something that can be found. This is important, as this bad habit can quickly co-opt the language of egolessness and come up with phrases as absurd as: “I will destroy my ego!” But, not being a thing, it cannot be destroyed, but by understanding our bare experience, our minds, the process of identification can stop. Any thoughts with “I,”

“me,” “my” and “mine” in them should be understood to be just thoughts which come and go. This is not something you can talk yourself out of. You have to perceive things as they are to stop this process.

A commonly heard one is, “I am always identifying with things, I am always attached to things,” with the implication that there is actually someone who is “bad” for “doing” this. Try to avoid this sort of story making, this sort of unmindful mental spinning, but be kind to yourself if it happens. The sensations that make up these thoughts are just empty in the best of ways.

So who is it that awakens? It is all of this transience which awakens, though for a more mystical, thorough and seemingly ridiculous answer take a look at No-self vs. True Self in Part III.

We don't have to sort this all out at once. We can begin with simple steps and the rest will fall into place if we are diligent and skillful.

So, now that I have made the possible seem mystical and abstruse, hopefully I will make it seem very attainable. The big, practical trick to understanding egolessness is to tune into the fact that sensations arise on their own in a natural causal fashion, even the intentions to do things.

This is a formal practice instruction.

This may sound hard until you think about it and then perhaps it may become so obvious it may seem trite. But it isn't, and

understanding it again and again, moment to moment, can bang

the truth into us, and if we fully get it we will be free. So, start and perhaps remain with obvious things like physical sensations. They just show up and check out over there, don't they? Tune into this. Allow this quality of things arising and passing on their own to show itself. Notice that whatever is observed isn't “us.” Do this again and again and again at a rate of one to ten times per second as before. That is all there is to it.

See, that wasn't so hard!

Thoughts, the breath, and all of our experience don't quite seem to be in our control, do they? That's it! Know this moment to moment.

Don't struggle too much with reality, except to break the bad habits of being lost in stories, poor concentration, and a lack of understanding of the Three Characteristics. Allow vibrations to show themselves and tune into the sense that you don't have to struggle for them to arise. Reality 31

The Three Characteristics

just continues to change on its own. That's really it. Investigate this again and again until you get it. Notice that this applies to each and every sensation that you experience.

So, while we can direct the mind to penetrate into phenomena with great precision and energy, we can also sit quietly and allow reality to just show itself as it is. Both perspectives are important and valuable, and being able to draw on each along the way can be very helpful. Said another way, we can realize that reality is already showing itself, settle quietly into this moment, and be clear and precise about it.

Obviously there is a bit of a paradox here relating to effort and surrender. In many ways it is at the heart of the spiritual life. There is a lot of advice available on this point, but in terms of insight meditation practice I would say this: If when meditating you can perceive the arising and passing of phenomena clearly and consistently, that is enough effort, so allow this to show itself naturally and surrender to it. If not, or if you are lost in stories, then there are some teachings coming up in the other lists that may help.

For day-to-day reality, the specifics of our experience are certainly important, but for insight into the truth of things in meditation they largely aren't. Said another way, it is neither the object of meditation, the causes of the object of meditation, nor the significance of the object of meditation, but the truth of the sensations that make up that “object”

which must be understood. Once you can tell what is mind and what is body, that's for the most part enough. So don't make stories, but know this: things come and go, they don't satisfy, and they ain't you. That is the truth. It is just that simple. If you can just not get to

caught up in the content and know these simple, basic and obvious truths moment to moment, some other wordless and profound understanding may arise on its own.

A useful teaching is conceptualizing reality as six sense doors: touch, taste, seeing, hearing, smelling, and thought. It may seem odd to consider thought as a sense door, but this is actually much more reasonable than the assumption that thoughts are an “us” or “ours” or in complete control. Just treat thoughts as more sensations coming in which must be understood to be impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self. In this strangely useful framework, there are not even ears, eyes,

skin, a nose, a tongue, or a mind. There are just sensations with various qualities, some of which may imply these things for an instant.

Bare experience is just dancing, flickering color, form, energy and space, basically, and the knowledge of these (which is not as fundamentally different from them as you might suspect). Try to stay close to that level when you practice, the level of the simple, direct, obvious, literal. But whenever you are lost in interpretation much beyond this, that ain't insight meditation, as much as people would like it to be. Have I said this enough? Okay, then.

I realize that most people go into meditation looking for stability, happiness, and comfort in the face of their own existence. I have just said that I have spent many years cultivating extreme experiential instability, careful awareness of the minutia of my suffering and the clear perception that I don’t even exist as a separate entity. Why this would be a good idea is a very complex topic that I will try to deal with later, but I can honestly say that these practices are without doubt the sanest thing I have ever done in my life.

One more little carrot: it is rightly said that to deeply understand any two of the characteristics simultaneously is to understand the third, and this understanding is sufficient to cause immediate first awakening.

THE FIVE SPIRITUAL FACULTIES

The Five Spiritual Faculties are said to be like a cart with four wheels and a driver. If any of the four wheels is too small or wobbly or not in balance with the others, then the going on the spiritual road will be rough. If the driver is not paying attention then there will also be problems. The four wheels symbolize faith , wisdom , ener gy and conce ntratio n. The driver symbolizes mindful nes s.

This is really a useful little teaching and quite a fine list. The trick is that faith and wisdom must both be made strong and kept in balance, as must energy and concentration. Mindfulness may always

be increased, so for this one the sky is the limit, but don't be too obsessive about it.

This sounds really simple and perhaps obvious, but there is quite a lot here, and on the spiritual path it is worth checking up on ourselves regularly and asking if the first four are all strong and in balance and if we might be just a bit more mindful.

FAITH AND WISDOM

Let's start with faith and wisdom . Faith in deficiency can lead to cynicism, giving up, half-hearted effort, and bitterness. Faith in excess can lead to blind adherence to dogma, sectarian arrogance, being disappointed when you realize that your teachers are human, an inability to realistically examine and revise your approach to spirituality when necessary, and many other problems. Wisdom in deficiency can lead to stupidity, blindness, gullibility, and foolish interpretations of the teachings. Wisdom in excess can lead to harmful cleverness, vanity about one's insights, an overemphasis on knowledge and study over practice and direct experience, and desperate attempts to think yourself to enlightenment. (Note: Zen koan training is something else entirely.) You can see that an excess of wisdom is similar to a lack of faith, and an excess of faith is similar to a lack of wisdom. When this balance is right there is a heartfelt steadiness, a quality of balanced and genuine inquiry, an ability to persevere and yet a certain humility. Faith at its best produces deep gratitude for life in all its richness, for its lessons, difficulties and blessings, and for the chance to awaken. Wisdom at its best comes from deep investigation of life as it is and goes far beyond

The Five Spiritual Faculties

the reach of reason and rational thought, transcending the paradoxes that these inevitably create. In the end, wisdom and faith converge.

How do we apply this? Most of us will suffer from imbalances of wisdom or faith with some regularity. So if things are going a bit off, just check in with the Five Spiritual Faculties and ask, “Could I perhaps work a bit on wisdom, faith, or bringing these into balance?” This is a powerful question and, if we are willing to be honest with ourselves, it can correct a lot of errors on the spiritual path. Another good way to apply this is to look at the list of symptoms of imbalance above and see if perhaps some of these apply to us. This is an easy way to see what might need some attention.

ENERGY AND CONCENTRATION

Energy and conce ntratio n work just the same way: they must both be strong but must also be in balance. When energy is deficient there is sloth, torpor, dullness, and tiredness. When energy is in excess the mind and body may be restless, jumpy, strained, and irritable. It

may even be unable to focus at all because so much emphasis is being placed on effort itself. When concentration is deficient the mind won't stay with an object and tends to get lost in thought. When concentration is in excess one can get lost in one's objects or be focused too narrowly and tightly for reality to “breathe.” Again, too much energy is related to a lack of concentration and vice versa.

When this balance is right, the posture is straight and steady but not rigid, and the mind is bright and focused steadily on objects and their back and forth interplay. When energy and concentration begin to come on line without mindfulness being strong yet, the mind may be prone to getting caught in obsessive thinking fueled by the strong energy and concentration, so watch for this and stay grounded in physical objects.

So, simply pay attention to how your practice is going and adjust the levels of energy and concentration accordingly. Finding the balance takes time, and may require regular readjustment as we learn to use the power of our minds. Sometimes it is helpful to be very gentle with our attention, as if we were trying to feel the wind on our skin from the flapping of a nearby butterfly’s wings. Sometimes it is helpful to use our 35

attention like a machine gun. Often we do just fine somewhere in between.

A willingness to play around with various combinations of energy and concentration produces the necessary personal experience to figure out what helps and what is too much or too little. Many of the problems that meditators come to ask meditation teachers about when they are doing their practice relate directly to just balancing energy and concentration, so engage with what that might mean and see if you can apply this little teaching to help you see clearly.

MINDFULNESS

Mindful nes s is in a category all by itself, as it can balance and perfect all the others. This does not mean that one shouldn't be informed by the other two pairs, but that mindfulness is really, really important. Mindfulness means knowing what is as it is right now. It is the quality of mind that knows things as they are. If you are trying to do this you are balancing energy and concentration, and also balancing faith and wisdom. From energy the mind is alert and attentive, from concentration it is stable. Faith here may also mean acceptance, and wisdom here is clear comprehension.

Notice that this has nothing do to with some sort of vague spacing out in which we wish that reality would go away and our thoughts would never arise again. I don't know where people get the idea that vague aversion to experience and thought is related to insight

practice, but it seems to be a common one. Mindfulness is about being very clear about our actual reality as it actually is. It is about being here now. The ultimate truth is found in the ordinary sensations that make up our world. If you are not mindful of them or reject them because you are looking for “depth” and “transcendence,” then you will be unable to appreciate what they have to teach and be unable to do insight practices.

So, if you know things just as they are this is enough. We just keep coming back to that one, don't we, but from lots of different angles.

Each one of these angles might be useful to you at different times, and having a few little lists to look at as we walk our path can bring fresh perspectives and keep us from getting stuck.

The Five Spiritual Faculties have also been presented in another order that can be useful: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and

wisdom. In this order, they apply to each of the Three Trainings. We have faith that training in morality is a good idea and that we can do it, so we exert energy to live up to a standard of clear and skillful living.

We realize that we must pay attention to our thoughts, words and deeds in order to do this, so we try to be mindful of them. We realize that we often fail to pay attention, so we try to increase our ability to concentrate on how we live our life. In this way, through experience, we become wiser in a relative sense, learning how to live a good and useful life.

Seeing our skill improve and the benefits it has for our life, we generate more faith, and so on.

We also may have faith that we might be able to attain to high states of consciousness, so we sit down on a cushion and energetically try to stabilize our attention. We realize that if we are not paying attention, being mindful, then this is impossible, so we work on mindfulness of our object and of the qualities of the state we wish to attain. We develop strong concentration on an object, stabilizing more consistently. We attain to high states and thus gain an understanding of how to navigate in that territory and the uses of doing so. Our success creates more faith, and so we apply energy to further develop our concentration abilities.

We begin to think it might be possible to awaken, we have faith, so we energetically explore the sensations that make up our world without exception. With an alert and energetic mind we explore this heart, mind and body just as it is now with mindfulness. Reality becomes more and more interesting, so our concentration grows, and

this combination of the first four produces fundamental wisdom. Wisdom leads to more faith, and the cycle goes around again.

The teaching of the Five Spiritual Faculties has also been explored at great lengths in many books, and there really is a lot to it. In its simple form you can easily apply it, and it can really help sometimes. Balance and strengthen. Strengthen and balance. These are the cycles we go through with these faculties, and there is no limit to the level at which they can be mastered.

One other thing is accurately said of the Five Spiritual Faculties as they apply to insight training: when they are balanced and perfected, this is sufficient cause for awakening.

37

6.THE SEVEN FACTORS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment are mindfulne ss ,

inve stigat ion o f the truth , energy , rapture , tranquility , conce ntratio n and equanimit y. So, we have three concepts from the Five Spiritual Faculties and four that seem new but have actually already been touched on to some degree. The order here is actually closely related to the stages of something called “The Progress of Insight,”

which is like a map of standard stages through which diligent insight meditators pass in cycles. This connection is a fairly advanced topic that will be explored later.

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment might be regarded as a

pyramid with mindfulness as the base and each factor supporting and helping create the other. However, every factor is also important at every stage as well, so we will look into each of these and see what they can tell us.

MINDFULNESS

Mindful nes s has already been covered above, but in terms of practice I will say that mindfulness can be really useful in sorting out what is mind and what is body, as mentioned on the section on impermanence in the Three Characteristics. You might want to read that one again, as it is really relevant to practically applying these first two factors of enlightenment. Basically, we need to know the basic sensations that make up our world. This is the crucial foundation of insight practices. Not surprisingly, the first classic insight that leads to the others is called “Knowledge of Mind and Body” and arises when we learn to clearly distinguish between the two as they occur.

So with mindfulness we sort out what is physical, what is visual, what is mental, what is pleasant, what is unpleasant, what is neutral, and all of that. We can know what is a mental sensation and what is a related physical feeling. We can know what specific sensations make up our emotions. We can know each thing and the mental impression of it that follows it. We can know the intentions that precede actions

and thoughts. We can know where sensations are in relation to each other.

We can know exactly when they occur and how they change during their very brief stay. We can and should sort these out as best we can.

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Be patient and precise. Become fluent in the sensations that make up your reality.

While I have tried to avoid advocating one specific insight tradition or technique over any other, there is an exercise that you might find helpful when trying to do this. It is commonly called "Noting," and it has its origins in the Pali Canon in Sutta #111, One by One as They Occurred, of The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (very worthwhile reading). It is used primarily in the Mahasi Sayadaw insight tradition from Burma, though related exercises are found in various Zen traditions, notably Soto Zen and Korean Chan, and probably in Tibetan Hinayana traditions as well.

Noting is the practice that got me the most breaks and insights in my early practice, particularly when coupled with retreats, and my enthusiasm for it is understandably extreme. I still consider it the foundation of my practice, the technique that I fall back on when things get difficult or when I really want to push deep into new insight territory.

Thus, of all the techniques and emphases I mention in this book, take this one the most seriously and give it the most attention. Its simplicity belies its astonishing power.

The practice is this: make a quiet, mental one-word note of whatever you experience in each moment. Try to stay with the sensations of breathing, noting these quickly as "rising" (as many times as the sensations of the breath rising are experienced) and then "falling" in the same way. This could also be considered fundamental insight practice instructions. When the mind wanders, notes might include "thinking,"

"feeling," "pressure," "tension," "wandering," "anticipating," "seeing,"

"hearing," "cold," "hot," "pain," "pleasure," etc. Note these sensations one by one as they occur and then return to the sensations of breathing.

Here are some valuable tips for successful noting. Don't get too neurotic about whether or not you have exactly the correct word for what arises. The noting should be as consistent and continuous as possible, perhaps one to five times per second. Speed and an ability to keep noting no matter what arises are very important. Anything that derails your noting practice deserves aggressive and fearless noting

the next time it arises. Note honestly and precisely. So long as you note whatever arises, you know that you were mindful of it. Noticing each 39

sensation and those that follow, you will see their true nature. Seeing their true nature, you will gain profound insights.

What the sensations are doesn't matter one bit from the point of view of noting practice. What is important is that you know what they are. The difference between these two perspectives should be clearly understood. This practice is directly related to Koan practices such as

"what is it?" and is loosely related to breathing exercises where you count breaths from 1 to 10.

One of my very best insight meditation teachers, a monk from Singapore, would hold interviews every two days while I was on my third retreat. It was a beautiful center in Penang, Malaysia that was very conducive to practice. I would come in and describe all sorts of experiences that I was all excited about, and he would simply listen calmly to me go on and on and then finally ask, "Did you note it?"

That was almost all he ever said. It was amazing how easy it was to forget that simple instruction, and equally amazing how extremely useful it was when I remembered to follow it. He didn't seem to care about anything other than that I get to know my reality as it was with great precision and consistency. I knew very little theory then, but during those two weeks I practiced noting quickly all day long and made the fastest progress I have ever made in my life, getting all the way to the very brink of first awakening in a mere 14-day retreat. Since that time, I have been a big fan of this particularly direct and down-to-earth method.

There are many techniques for waking up to the truth of our

experience, of which noting is just one. I have found it to be extremely powerful and fast, but each person must find what works for them. The trick is to get to know one's reality as it is, and what techniques one uses to do this do not matter much so long as they work and bring results.

What is meant by "results" will be clearly spelled out in The Progress of Insight in Part III.

INVESTIGATION OF THE TRUTH

Once we start to know what our objects are, what our actual reality is, then we can get down to the good stuff: knowing the truth of these things, called appropriately investi gatio n of the truth

, also called

investigation of the dharma. Dharma just means truth. So, once mindfulness has made things a bit clearer we can know that things come 40

and go, don't satisfy and ain't us. Hey, the Three Characteristics again!

They are the truth, the sooner we understand this the better, and nothing helps us understand them like seeing them again and again.

Forgive this brief digression, but I am no fan of the popular term

"mindfulness meditation," as mindfulness is essential for both concentration practices (which lead to temporary bliss states) and insight practices (which lead to fundamental freedom). The crucial difference between these meditation practices is that insight practices also stress investigation of the Three Characteristics, whereas concentration practices emphasize stabilizing in the illusion of solidity and continuity while ignoring the fact that the sensations that make up this are all impermanent, etc. Thus, I hope that one day the modern meditation world drops this confusing term in favor of more precise language.

In addition to the categories of sensations mentioned above in Mindfulness, one could also consider consistent investigation of all sensations that seem to have to do with the direction and movement of attention, as well as investigating all sensations that have to do with questioning, wanting, the application of energy and even the individual sensations that make up the process of investigation itself. These are very interesting objects, as are "the hindrances."

Traditionally, books on meditation spend a lot of time discussing the possible hindrances to meditation. I will not. The hindrances are an important topic, but they can easily begin to seem more ominous than they really are. Hindrances are just anything of which we were not mindful and of which we did not investigate the truth. Now that we know to be mindful and investigate the Three Characteristics of all moment-to-moment experiences, there will only be hindrances when we forget to do this.

If we do not forget to do this, there will be no hindrances. No phenomena are inherently a hindrance unless we do not understand them. If we did not understand at least one of the Three Characteristics of each of the sensations that make up a phenomenon, no matter what it was, it was a hindrance. Remember that the content of reality is not our concern in insight meditation, but the ultimate truth of the sensations that make up experiential reality is. So whatever seems to be in the way of your practice, remember that the experience of that 41

moment is the practice and contains all the truth you could ever need!

All phenomena are of the nature of ultimate truth. When we

know deeply that these are all of the nature of ultimate truth, phenomena cease to be a fundamental problem.

The Buddha was a master of teaching through analogies that were easily accessible to those listening to him. I am certainly not in his league in this regard, and this will be clearly demonstrated by the analogy I am about to use for investigation. However, it has its points, and so after much consideration, I have included it here.

The Buddha gave his analogies names, and I have named this one

"The Analogy of Shootin' Aliens." Bear with me here! Just about all of us in this day and age have at least seen if not played video games involving shooting aliens. As the game goes on, the aliens come in faster and faster, some taking multiple hits to kill them. Some of these games penalize us for wasting ammunition, causing us to really focus on exactly where and when these aliens are arising, so that we may shoot them exactly when they arise as efficiently as possible before they shoot us.

A few of you may already be thinking, "Get that bloody and violent analogy out of this book of holy wisdom!" The Buddha used many similar analogies, one of which comes to mind is has to do with a horse trainer (teacher) who kills horses that simply will not be broken (stops teaching unreachable students). Thus, you pansy critics can all drop dead.

Anyway, in this analogy the aliens are all of the little sensations that make up our experience. Shooting them is paying attention to them and seeing their true nature, perhaps with the aid of noting practice (like a gun with laser sight on it). The aliens shooting us is what happens when we do not see their true nature, as they become a hindrance, binding us on the wheel of suffering for the duration of our inability to shoot them.

Some may even take us out of the game (cause us stop practicing entirely). The aliens that take multiple hits to kill are our big issues, those things that are difficult for us to break into their composite sensations. Being penalized for shooting wastefully is what can happen if we note sensations that we didn't actually experience because we fell into repetitive, imprecise, mantra-like noting habits.

Further, the speed, precision and playful attitude required for video games is exactly like the feel of well-done insight practices. If you watch some kid playing a fast alien-shooting game, you will notice that they are really going for it. They are shooting very fast and definitely not thinking about anything but doing that. This is exactly the sort of dedication and passion that helps with insight practices.

When our mindfulness and investigation are on hair trigger, being

aware of every little sensation that arises and passes, we are bound to win sooner or later. The motto, “Note first, ask questions later,” is just so helpful if we are to keep practicing precisely without getting lost in the stories. Again, off the cushion the stories can have some value if not taken too seriously. On the cushion, take no prisoners: “Note ‘em all, and let God sort ‘em out!” This is seemingly extreme but actually very powerful and profound advice. Do not dismiss easily The Analogy of Shootin’ Aliens.

Where the Analogy of Shootin’ Aliens breaks down is that all these aliens want is attention and acceptance. They come to us so that we will greet them clearly and openly, but if we fail to do this they can get very troublesome. Their little alien hearts are being broken when we don’t get to know them as they are, so who can blame them when they get mischievous and try to trick us into paying more attention to them by causing trouble. Sure, it’s a bit childish of them, but we don’t always get to meet mature and well-adjusted aliens.

Thus, rather than killing our aliens by shooting them, we give them what they want by noticing or noting them. We don’t invite the pretty ones to stay with us forever, nor do we ignore the boring aliens. We don’t kick the ugly ones from our door either. Like a politician on the campaign trail, we extend a hand to all, say, “Hello!” and then quickly do this for lots of others. When we meet them, greet them, get to know, accept and even love them, they go away happy. I realize that I’ve just gone from being excessively violent to being excessively sentimental, but somewhere in there is what insight practices are all about.

I have already mentioned numerous possible exercises, perspectives and emphases that may be used when exploring our reality for the purpose of awakening, and I will continue to mention more as we go along. However, I recommend that the foundation of your practice be 43

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

investigation of the Three Characteristics of the sensations that make up your reality. If you find it too complicated to try to investigate all Three Characteristics at once, then I recommend quick and precise

investigation of impermanence. If this seems too difficult, I have found the simple practice of noting very quickly to be more than sufficiently powerful for gaining clear and direct insights into the true nature of thing. Should you find that the numerous instructions and avenues of inquiry I present to be too confusing, remember this paragraph and stick to these simple but profound practices. “When in doubt, note it out!”

ENERGY

So, we diligently investigate the ultimate truth of our experience, and this can actually be really invigorating once we get into it. Just as playing video games can be very exciting, we have lots of sensations coming in all the time that are just screaming to be understood. When we rise to this challenge, things can really begin to jump. Once we have sorted out what is mind and what is body and begun to see a bit of the Three Characteristics, this in itself can produce lots of ener gy , the third of the seven factors. This can be just a bit scary at first until we get used to how quick and powerful our minds can be. As mentioned in the Five Spiritual Faculties, energy is a very good thing, as it obviously energizes our practice. We can almost always call up just a bit more energy when we need it, and this is a good thing to realize. However, being mindful and investigating diligently can also lead to increased energy, so now you have more than one way to go about this! Thank you, Seven Factors of Enlightenment!

RAPTURE

When energy comes on line with mindfulness and investigation, this can produce something called rapture . Rapture has two general meanings, the first of which relates to deep joy, pleasure, and enthusiasm. These are valuable spiritual qualities, and Ye of Dark Puritanical Inklings take heed of this! It is much easier going on the spiritual path if we are generally enthusiastic about what we are doing.

This should be no surprise, but somehow it is often overlooked. I'm definitely not advocating hedonistic Epicureanism here, but to walk the 44

spiritual path with a sense of joy, a sense of wonder, a bit of a smile and especially a sense of humor is really good for you and everyone who has to be near you. Sure, there will be hard times and difficulties that can have good lessons to teach us, but be open to what joy and happiness life can bring.

Spiritual practice can also produce all kinds of odd experiences, some of which can be very intense, bizarre and far out. This is the other connotation of the word rapture, as these are commonly referred to as

“raptures.” Some of these might be really pleasant, some may just be weird, and some might completely suck. All the strange physical sensations, pains, pleasures, movements, visions, lights, perception distortions, etc., which may or may not show up as a result of spiritual practice are all just raptures. Repeat, just raptures. Don't get hung up on them or make stories out of them, as compelling as they can be, and don't think that they are required either: they aren't. The sensations that make them up come, go, ain't you, and don't satisfy.

Most are just byproducts of meditation and strong concentration. Many produce no wisdom. Some, of course, can provide deep insights into the truth of things, but don't get stuck on these. Many of these lessons show up once and never again.

Some people can get so serious and fixated on suffering that they fight the pleasant raptures and even cling to the difficult ones. Don't do this! The joy and pleasure that may arise in meditation has wonderful healing aspects to it, and it can lead to deep tranquility, concentration and equanimity, which are all really good things. Don't cling to pleasant states either, as you will just get stuck and be frustrated when they end, which they always do. In general, if you try to fight or cling to raptures you will get stuck, and if you can accept them as they are this will be of benefit. See equanimity at the end of this list, as well as the expertly written Chapter 9 of A Path with Heart by Jack Kornfield.

This is a good place for me to mention the concept of vedena, which is a Pali word that relates to the degree of pleasantness, unpleasantness or neutrality of a sensation. If one pays too much exclusive attention to sensations that are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, while ignoring the other sensations going on at that time, then one is likely to be missing many opportunities for insight. Preoccupation 45

with pleasant sensations can cause one to become a vapid bliss-junkie.

Preoccupation with unpleasant sensations can cause one to become dark and depressed. Preoccupation with neutral sensations can cause one to become dull and emotionally flat. (Thanks to the esteemed Christopher Titmuss for the inspiration for this paragraph). Our experience tends to be a complex mixture of many flavors of sensations.

They are all quite worthy of investigation.

The take-home message here is that rapture and raptures are to be understood as they are and related to wisely, accepting all sensations that make them up, be they pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Learn when to put the breaks on practice if the difficult raptures are teaching you their important lessons a bit too fast for you to keep it together, and learn how to open to the wonderful joy and bliss which spiritual practice may sometimes produce.

TRANQUILITY

Joy, bliss and rapture can produce tranqu ility . We can associate being peaceful with tranquility. Focusing on tranquility and a more spacious and silent perspective in the face of difficult raptures can help you ride them out, and just sitting silently and observing reality

do its thing can be very powerful practice. There are actually whole schools of spiritual practice dedicated to this. Thus, tranquility is a really good thing in meditation. We may think of great spiritual masters being internally tranquil, and while it may or may not be true, there are reasons why we associate tranquility with spirituality. A mind that is not tranquil will have a harder time concentrating and being balanced. It is just as simple as that. Being kind and moral can help with tranquility, as this lessens the harsh thought patterns in our minds.

This does not mean that non-tranquil moments are not "spiritual"

or that we must adopt some sort of restrained and artificial flatness.

Remember, all types of sensations, mind states and actions are valid phenomena for investigation and real expressions of what is going on.

Real tranquility comes from a deep understanding of all of this, but all too often this ideal becomes some sort of dehumanizing exercise in passivity. Real tranquility often comes naturally, though it may be skillfully cultivated as well. Cultivating equanimity of the kind mentioned later is helpful for cultivating tranquility, as is deepening in 46

pure concentration practices, the second spiritual training. Tranquility, concentration and equanimity are intimately related.

CONCENTRATION

Co ncentrati on we have seen twice before, and we will see it again in much more detail in Part III. One of the challenges of deep tranquility is keeping the mind concentrated. This may seem like a direct contradiction to what I have just said, but there may be stages of practice where there can be so much tranquility that the mind can get quite dull and hard to focus. So, just as tranquility is good for concentration and acceptance, too much is similar to not having enough energy. Remember, balance and strengthen, strengthen and balance.

As these are the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, they apply directly to insight practices, training in wisdom. Thus, the concentration being referred to here is a very different kind of concentration than that used for attaining high concentration states. It is called "momentary concentration." In the context of insight, concentration really means that we are able to very consistently investigate each sensation that arises, one after the other. In this way, we have stability of our ability to investigate, in that it can happen again and again without interruption, but we are not trying to attain stable states or anything else, as we are doing insight practices.

EQUANIMITY

As mentioned before, concentration can produce great stability of mind, and this can lead to equa nimity . Equanimity is that quality of mind that is okay with things, or balanced in the face of anything, even a lack of equanimity. This may sound a bit strange, but it is well worth considering. Equanimity also relates to a lack of struggle even when struggling, to effortlessness even in effort, to peacefulness even when there is not tranquility. When equanimity is really well developed, one is not frightened of being afraid, worried by being concerned, irritated by being irritated, pissed off at being angry, etc. The fundamental nature of the mind is imperturbable and absolutely equanimous; phenomena do not disturb space or even fundamentally disturb themselves from a certain point of view.

There are actually whole spiritual traditions that involve just tuning into this basic truth. There can be great value in learning to see the space around things, rather than just being caught up in the things themselves. A useful phrase from one of these traditions is “cultivating space-like meditative equipoise.” The more we habituate this way of being, the more we connect with the truth of our minds.

There are also some really excellent teachings, especially from Zen and Daoism (also spelled Taoism), that relate to this, such as the teachings about no defilements, no enlightenment (or practice is enlightenment), nothing to perfect, no where to go, etc., and checking in with some of these teachings can be very helpful. This is the important counterbalance to spiritual striving and gung-ho practice that can get very future-oriented if done incorrectly. In the end, even if you have all kinds of insights, if you don't have equanimity, you will be beating your head against a wall, and it actually might feel like that or worse.

Once again we are back to knowing this moment just as it is. This

“just as it is” quality is related to mindfulness and also to equanimity. In the end, we have to just accept the truth of our lives, of our minds, of our neuroses, of our defilements, of impermanence, of suffering, and of egolessness. We have to accept this, and this is what they are talking about when they say “just open to it,” “just be with it,” “just let it be,”

“just let it go,” and all of that.

From a pure insight practice point of view, you can’t ever

fundamentally “let go” of anything, so I sometimes wish the popularity of this misleading and indifference-producing admonition would decline, or at least be properly explained. However, if you simply investigate the truth of the Three Characteristics of the

sensations that seemed to be a solid thing, you will come to the wondrous realization that reality is continually “letting go” of itself! Thus, “let it go” at its best actually means, “don’t give a bunch of transient sensations an excessive sense of solidity.” It does not mean, “stop feeling or caring,” nor does it mean, “pretend that the noise in your mind is not there.”

If people start with “just open to it” and yet don't develop strong mindfulness, look into the Three Characteristics and gain deep insights, then their practice may be less like meditation and a lot more like psychotherapy, day dreaming, or even self-absorbed, spiritually-48

rationalized, neurotic indulgence in mind noise. It was noticing the high prevalence of this activity and the pervasive and absurd notion that there was no point in trying to get enlightened that largely demolished my vision of being a happy meditation teacher in some mainstream meditation center somewhere.

Psychotherapy, on the other hand, can be a fine undertaking, but it is a completely different endeavor from meditation and falls squarely in the domain of the first training. I do not, however, advocate wallowing in self-absorbed mind noise, and anyone who has been to a small group meeting on a meditation retreat knows what I am talking about. This is what happens when people don’t ground the mind in the object of meditation.

On the other hand, even if you gain all kinds of strong

concentration, look deeply into impermanence, suffering and no-self, but can't just open to these things, can't just let them be, can't accept the sometimes absurd and frightening truths of your experience, then you will likely be stuck in hell until you can, particularly in the higher stages of insight practices.

Reflect on these previous three paragraphs now and often, as many, many errors on the spiritual path come from not understanding the points made therein. Too often there is an imbalance between the first three (mindfulness, investigation, and energy), and the last three (tranquility, concentration and equanimity). The vast majority of aspiring insight meditators are, to be honest, way, way, way too slack about the first three. Just so, some gung-ho meditators get into trouble when they don't cultivate enough acceptance, balance and peace, related to the second three. When people focus only on the middle factor, rapture, they become vapid bliss-junkies. In short, all seven factors are very important.

The order here is important. Start with good technique,

mindfulness, investigation, etc., and work on the others along the way.

In summary, you must have both insights and acceptance, and each perspective can and should help the other along the way. They are actually one and the same.

One last thing about equanimity: its near enemy, its deadening imposter, is indifference. Real equanimity is accepting of the full range 49

of the heart and experience, whereas indifference is dry, flat and heartless. This point is frequently misunderstood. However, being accepting of the full range of the heart doesn't mean always acting on whatever impulse comes up. Act only on the impulses of the heart that seem skillful and kind.

To balance and perfect the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, you guessed it, is sufficient cause for awakening. Thus, checking in from time to time with this little list and seeing how you are doing and what might need some improvement is a good idea, and just having this list in the back of your mind somewhere can be helpful.

It is important to note that only one factor, investigation of the Three Characteristics, separates training in concentration from training in fundamental insight. When purposefully training in concentration, we decide to be mindful of a limited and specific concentration object, such as the breath or even a rarified state of consciousness. We do not, however, investigate the individual sensations that make up that state, as it would break apart under that investigation and produce insights. If we are not looking for ultimate insights at that point in time, then we should avoid investigating that state. However, we do apply energy to stabilize our concentration, and this produces rapture, a characteristic of the early concentration states. We also cultivate concentration very strongly, obviously, and also tranquility and equanimity, which help us stabilize early states and attain to higher ones. Thus, six of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment are cultivated by training in concentration, and it is often recommended as a preliminary training before training in insight for this and other reasons.

Training in morality also cultivates some of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, though in a less formally meditative way. In order to work well in the ordinary world, it is very helpful to be mindful of what we are doing, saying and thinking and also what effects these produce in the world so that we can consciously work to craft the life we want to lead as best we can. It is helpful to exert energy as we craft our life for obvious reasons. We can also cultivate tranquility, the ability to not take life too seriously, to relax, finding that balance of focus and ease that makes for a good life. We can learn to concentrate on staying on track with our tasks, goals and aspirations, though in

this case concentration is 50

more like a form of discipline than the concentration of formal meditation, though discipline of action, speech and mind is vital for the other two trainings. Finally, we can learn that we cannot get rid of all of the bumps on our road, so having the shock absorbers of equanimity, the ability to stay spacious and accepting of what happens, is also very helpful for crafting a good and healthy life.

7.THE THREE TRAININGS REVISITED

The Three Trainings provide a great framework for thinking about spiritual work, a framework that can help us maintain a clear and empowering way of thinking about what we are doing. In this chapter, I will discuss many important aspects of the spiritual path and use the Three Trainings, actually the scope of each of the Three Trainings, to provide an easy and powerful way of dealing with these complex topics.

Just to review, the scope of the first training, which I call morality, is the ordinary world, the conventional world, the world that we are all familiar with before we even consider more specialized topics such as meditation. The goal is to act, speak and think in ways that are conducive to the welfare of yourself and others. The scope of the second training, concentration or depths of meditation, is to focus on very specific and limited objects of meditation and thus attain to specific altered states of consciousness. The scope of the third training, that of insight or wisdom, is to shift to perceiving reality at the level of individual sensations, perceive the Three Characteristics of them, and thus attain to profound insights into the nature of reality and thus realize stages of enlightenment.

First, I will consider happiness in the context of scopes of the Three Trainings. As training in morality is such a vast subject, the ways we can find happiness is also a vast subject, and becomes interesting primarily in comparison to the other two training's scopes, those of concentration and wisdom. The common denominator of the concentration

attainments is that we learn to get ourselves into states of consciousness that are some mixture of blissful and peaceful, as well as increasingly spacious and removed from our ordinary experience. These can be a source of happiness that is far more intense and reliable than the happiness found in the ordinary world. Being able to access as much happiness and peace as we wish when we wish reduces our anger at the world from not providing us with these, making us less needy and greedy. There is also the happiness that comes from seeing the true nature of the sensations that make up our world and thus attaining to stages of realization or enlightenment.

There are three areas of renunciation that correspond to the scopes of the Three Trainings. We can renounce aspects of the ordinary world

by simply abandoning these things. We can quit our job, leave our relationship, stop smoking crack, and shave our heads. We can try to be less angry or fearful. We can work on our communication skills, trying to avoid lying and slander. Some of these may be easier than others, and some of these may be helpful and some not, but the

important point here is that these sorts of forms of renunciation are, for better or for worse, renunciation of aspects of the ordinary world within the context of the first training's scope. Or, we can renounce renouncing these things and do them. Renunciation is a very arbitrary concept when applied to the first training.

There is also the renunciation that comes from being willing and able to attain the temporary concentration attainments. We are willing to spend some time removed from the ordinary experience of the world and enter into states where the ordinary world becomes more and more removed from us. It is usually not that hard to convince people that there may be occasions when having the ability to renounce the ordinary world in this way for some period of time could be advantageous. We can all imagine taking a little bliss break and finding it helpful in some appropriate context.

There is also the type of renunciation associated with insight practices, in which one is willing to break from the gross conceptual way of working that is helpful for the scope of the ordinary world, break from the more restricted and refined conceptual way of working that is necessary to attain stable altered states of consciousness, and move to perceiving sensations individually and directly, seeing the true nature of them. This is a much more subtle and sophisticated form of

renunciation than the other two, and it is not always easy to convince people that having this option open to them is a good idea.

While "enlightenment" generally sounds very appealing, it suddenly sounds strange in the context of seeing all sensations as being utterly transient, a source of pain if we make artificial dualities out of them, and not self. People often mix up the three kinds of renunciation, the most common error being that they imagine that they must "give up" aspects of the first two trainings (a happy life and fun concentration states) in order to renounce them in the insight way, in which they see the true nature of the sensations that make up these things. They imagine that 53

they must give up their job or relationship in order to see its true nature, or imagine that they must not enter into high states to see their true nature. This basic conceptual error causes many of the problems that people find on the spiritual path. That brings me to the three forms of suffering.

First, there is the form of suffering that the Buddha is most famous for talking about, ordinary suffering, the standard list including such things as birth, sickness, old age, death, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. These are ordinary forms of suffering that we can try to mitigate as best we can by ordinary methods, i.e. by

working within the scope of the first training, i.e. the conventional world. I am a big fan of trying to find worldly happiness so long as we do not neglect the importance of the other two trainings. There is also the form of suffering relating to the scope of the second training that comes from being limited to our ordinary state of consciousness, with our only way out coming from sleep or the use of chemical substances. We yearn for bliss that is not so bound up in things like whether or not we get a good job, for experiences like those found in the concentration states. Our minds have this potential, and the failure to be able to access these states at times when doing so would be helpful and healthy is a source of bondage. I am a big fan of being able to attain these wonderful states so long as we do not neglect the other two trainings.

There is also the kind of suffering that comes from making artificial dualities out of non-dual sensations, and all of the unnecessary reactivity, misperceptions, distortions of perspective and proportion, and basic blindfulness that accompanies that process. This kind of suffering, relating to the scope of training in wisdom, is not touched by the first two trainings, and thus forms a background level of suffering in our life and also increases the potential for further suffering in the other two scopes. This form of suffering is gradually relieved by the stages of enlightenment, as fewer and fewer aspects of reality have the capacity to trick the mind in this way. I am a big fan of awakening and thus eliminating this pervasive form of suffering, just as long as we do not also neglect the other two trainings.

The suffering of the ordinary world can be extremely unpredictable, and working to relieve it is a very complex business, the work of a 54

lifetime and perhaps an eternity. The suffering related to being unable to access refined altered states of consciousness is mitigated by simply taking the time to learn the skills necessary and then refining them until they are accessible to us when we wish. There are limits to these states, and so the basic states attainable by training in concentration can be very thoroughly mastered within a lifetime and even within a few years or perhaps months for those with talent and diligence. The stages of enlightenment are permanent, and once they are attained, that aspect of our suffering is forever eliminated and never arises again. This can be accomplished by those who take the time to learn the skills necessary to see individual sensations clearly and are willing to work on that level.

These basic facts can be used to help us plan our quest for

happiness and the elimination of the various forms of suffering in our life. We can direct our studies, our training, and work on specific

skills that lead to specific effects and abilities in the order we choose, within the limits of our life circumstances and the resources available to us. For instance, it might make sense to learn concentration skills early in our life, as they cultivate so many of the skills necessary for the other two trainings and can provide increased sense of ease and wellbeing. For example, rather than popping a cold beer at the end of a hard day, we could bathe our body and mind in as much bliss and peace as we can stand for as long as we wish. If we master concentration practices, we have the option to make such choices.

It might also make sense to work on insight practices early rather than later so as to reduce the amount of time during our life that we live with the fundamental suffering caused by the illusion of duality. There is only so much we can do to prevent ordinary suffering for ourselves and others, though it is always good to do what we can. Thus, it is also good to realize that we can also reduce and eliminate the other forms of suffering through learning the two basic styles of meditation more easily than we can eliminate much of our conventional suffering.

There are three ways in which words such as “enlightenment” are used, and these may also relate to the scopes of the Three Trainings.

However, I feel that this is a dangerous habit, and I strongly advocate using enlightenment and similar words to refer only to ultimate insights, meaning the stages of awakening in the high and traditional sense.

While we may hear people speak of committing “enlightened” actions, or of thinking in “enlightened” ways, I have come to the conclusion that for spiritual training we either need to be very careful to explain that these are very conventional and relative definitions of enlightenment or not use such language at all.

Some traditions give some of the very high concentration states an ultimate status. I also advocate strongly against this, as did the Buddha.

These states are so compelling and seductive for some people that they imagine they are enlightened in the non-dual sense when they are merely having temporary unitive or unknowing experiences

(experiences where reality did something that was sufficiently lacking in specific qualities or intensity to be clearly known). Thus, I strongly suggest that such attainments never be associated with the language of enlightenment in any way.

Thus, I define enlightenment as permanently eliminating the basic perceptions that either duality or unity is the answer, and thus attaining to permanent non-dual realizations that are unshakable. It

has nothing whatsoever to do with how things manifest and everything to do with some basic understanding of those things. I devote an entire chapter to explaining this more fully, but it is important for the discussion in between here and there to have been introduced to the strict and formal definition of enlightenment that I will be using.

These frameworks can also be useful for looking at other common issues such as thoughts of past and future that people run into when they get into meditation. Confusion arises when these pieces of advice are applied outside of the scope for which they were meant.

When working on our ordinary lives, i.e. within the scope of the first training, the content of our thoughts on past and future is very helpful, in fact absolutely necessary. With experience we generate a body of memory of what leads to what in this world, and with our predictive ability we can use this to try to craft a well-lived life, however we define that. However, when working on training in concentration, such thoughts are generally ignored or suppressed by deep concentration on another object. When doing insight practices, it doesn't matter so much if thoughts of past or future arise, so long as we ignore their content, notice that they occur now, and notice the true nature of the individual 56

The Three Trainings Revisited

sensations that make up those thoughts. It is common to hear of people trying to apply one piece of advice to a scope for which it was never intended, like trying to stop thinking when trying to deal with their daily life. This sort of practice would simply promote stupidity, and there is already more than enough of that. In short, when evaluating or applying a piece of spiritual advice, make sure you understand the specific context for which it was designed.

I thought it would be fun to envision the Three Trainings as characters and have them critique each other and then talk with each other about ways that they could reinforce each other. I will do this in the form of a short play in one act. While I will exaggerate and dichotomize their issues with each other for comic effect, I do think that each of the points made has some validity. Hopefully, you will see through the humor to the important points being illustrated.

Curtain opens. Morality, Concentration and Insight are sitting in a bar having a discussion. A large stack of empty shot glasses sits in front of each character.

Morality: You navel gazing, self-absorbed, good-for-nothing freaks! I go out and work hard all day long to make this world fit to live in while you two sit on those sweat covered cushions and cultivate butt-rot! I go out and make good money, keep food in our mouths, a roof over our heads, deal with our stuff, and you go out and

spend our money up at that freak-house you call a meditation center when there is important work to be done! I want to work on my tan!

Insight: Who are you calling "self-absorbed?" I can't be self absorbed by definition! If it wasn't for me, you would be so stuck in dualistic illusion that you wouldn't know your ass from your elbow, you conceptually fixated, emotionally mired, bound-up-in-manifestation-looking, twelve sandwich eating…

Concentration: Yeah! And by the way, Mr. Oh-so-worldly, you

should learn to lighten up sometimes! Work your fingers to the bone, whaddaya get? Bony fingers. That's what. And that goes for you too, Mr. Enlightenment! If you didn't have my skills, you'd be shit out of luck, unable to focus, and dead boring to boot! Who brings up the deep joy and wondrous mind states around here? I do, that's who, so you two should just shut up!

Insight: Oh, yeah? Well, Mr. La-la Land, if it weren't for me, we'd be so caught up in your transient highs that we might just get arrested.

Somebody call the law! You two are so easily sucked into blowing things out of proportion that without me you two would have all the perspective of a dung heap!

Morality: Dung heap? You'd be lucky to have a dung heap if it wasn't for me, you emptiness-fixated, I'm-oh-so-non-conceptual vibration-junkie. What good is having perspective if you don't go out and use it?

Concentration: Yeah! And speaking of perspective, I give you guys more perspective than you have any idea of. Not only do I provide a bridge between our resident Save-the-world Poster Child and the Void-fixated Flicker-boy, I help you two get your twitchy little minds right! I help the Boy Scout here gain more and deeper insights into his screwed up emotional world and "stuff" than he ever could have on his own, and if it wasn't for me, Mr. Ultimate would just be spinning his wheels in the parking lot! And further more, I am fun, fun, fun!

Insight: Yeah, maybe, but you don't know when to stop, you

otherworldly space-case! If Relative Man and I hadn't pulled you out of the clouds, you'd still be lost in some formless realm thinking you had half a clue. I'm the one with the clue! There ain't nothin' in the world like what I know, and without it, you two's whole pathetic little sense of identity would be bound up in a world beyond your control. I am your salvation, and you know it!

Morality: Beyond my control my ass! I make things happen in this world, great things! I'm the one that really gets us somewhere! I make a difference! Who cares if there is no self when people are starving in

Africa?

Insight: Who cares is exactly my point! There is no separate, permanent self that cares!

Morality: “I know you are, but what am I?”

Insight: Exactly!

Morality: Jerk!

Concentration: See? You guys gotta' chill out, get some balance and peace in your life. Take a few moments and just breathe! Leave your worries and cares behind, and fly the friendly skies! It’s free, legal, and 58

oh-so-recommended. You can quit whenever you like! All your friends are doing it! Come on, just relax!

Morality: All right, Fly Guy, when are we going to deal with our emotional issues, huh? When are we going to save the world? We can’t just go on vacation forever.

Insight: Your problem is that you can’t see the sensations that make up these “issues” as they really are, so you make such a big friggin’ deal out of them. I mean, I see your point, but you are so reactive and blind that you are hardly the one for the job. You solidify these things into huge monsters, forget you have done this, and then freak out when they come running after you. You need a clue, you confused little shrew!

Morality: Oh, yeah! Don’t think that just because you can see the true nature of the issues that make up your reality that you won’t still have stuff to deal with! Now, that’s delusion!

Insight: It’s even more deluded to think that you can really have a completely healthy perspective on anything without me, you Monster Maker!

Concentration: Dude, do you see those angels floating through the wall?

Morality: Where in the Hell did I find you freaks?

Insight: Short memory, eh? You found us when you realized you couldn’t do it on your own. You needed us to really be able to do the job you wanted to do, to really make a difference and be as happy and effective as you could be.

Morality: Yeah? And when can I get rid of you?

Concentration and Insight: When you have mastered us completely.

Jinx, one two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!

Morality: Bartender…

THE END.

If you find that you have gotten to the point when you cannot laugh at your own path, stop immediately and figure out why. I hope

you have found this little, irreverent dialogue entertaining. While obviously a bit ridiculous, these sorts of tensions can arise until we really have a solid grasp of each training. When we have this, they will work together as they were meant to.

59

8.THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths, suf ferin g, its cau se , its end , and the path that leads to its end , are fundamental to the teachings of the Buddha. He was fond of summarizing his whole teaching in terms of them. Actually, when asked to be really concise, he would just say the first and third: suffering and the end of suffering. This was what he taught. Like the other little lists here, they have great profundity on many levels and are worth exploring in depth.

TRUTH NUMBER ONE: SUFFERING

The first truth is the truth of suf ferin g. Hey, didn't we just see that in the Three Characteristics? Yes! Isn't that great! We also just saw it in The Three Trainings Revisited. There must have been something important about it for it to start off something called the Four Noble Truths that is not immediately obvious. Why do we practice? Suffering, that's why! It is just that simple. Why do we do anything? Suffering!

Plenty of people balk at this, and say that they do lots of things because of reasons other than suffering. I suppose that to be really correct I should add in ignorance and habit, but these are intimately connected to suffering. This is worth investigating in depth. Perhaps there is something more to this first truth that they may have missed on first inspection, as it is a deep and subtle teaching. Actually, to understand this first truth is to understand the whole of the spiritual path, so take the time to investigate it.

The basic gist of the truth from a relative point of view is that we want things to be other than they are, and this causes pain. We want things that are nice to be permanent, we want to get what we want and avoid what we don't want. We wish bad things would go faster than they do, and these are all contrary to reality. We all die, get sick, have conflicts, and constantly seem to be running around either trying to get something (greed), get away from something (hatred), or tune out from reality all together (delusion). We are never perfectly happy with things just as they are. These are the traditional, relative ways in which suffering is explained, but these definitions can only take us so far.

At the most fundamental level, the level that is the most useful for doing insight practices, we wish desperately that there was some

separate, permanent self, and we spend huge amounts of time

doing our best to prop up this illusion. In order to do this, we habitually ignore lots of useful information about our reality and give our mental impressions and simplifications of reality much more importance than they are necessarily due. It is this illusion that adds a problematic element to the normal and understandable ways in which we go about trying to be happy. We constantly struggle with reality because we misunderstand it, i.e. because reality misunderstands itself.

"So what's new?" one might say. Good point! It isn't new, is it? This has been the whole of our life! The big question is "Is there some understanding which makes a difference?" Yes, or we wouldn't be bothering with all of this spirituality stuff. Somewhere down in our being there is a little voice that cries, "There is another way!" We can find this other way.

Connecting with the truth of suffering can actually be very motivating for spiritual practice. Most traditional talks on the Buddha's teachings begin with this. More than just being motivating for spiritual practice, tuning into suffering is spiritual practice! Many people start meditating and then get frustrated with how much suffering and pain they experience, never knowing that they are actually starting to understand something. They cling to the ideal that insight practices will produce peace and bliss and yet much of what they find is suffering. They don't realize that things on the cushion tend to get worse before they get better. Thus, they reject the very truths they must deeply understand to obtain the peace they were looking for and thus get nowhere. They reject their own valid insights that they have obtained through valid practice. I suspect that this is one of the greatest and most common stumbling blocks on the spiritual path.

There is a flip side to suffering which can help, and that is compassion, the wish for there to not be suffering. Wherever there is suffering there is compassion, though most of the time somewhat twisted by the confused logic of the process of ego. More on this in a bit, but it leads directly to the second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering.

The Four Noble Truths

TRUTH NUMBER TWO: "DESIRE"

The Second Noble Truth is that the cause of suffe rin g is

desire , also rendered as craving or attachment. We want things to be other than they are because we perceive the world through the odd logic of the process of ego, through the illusion of the split of the perceiver and the perceived. We might say, "Of course we want things to be great and not unpleasant! What do you expect?" The problem

isn't actually quite in the desire for things to be good and not be bad in the way that we might think; it is, in fact, just a bit subtler than that.

This is a really slippery business, and many people can get all into craving for non-craving and desiring non-attachment. This can be useful if it is done wisely and it is actually all we have to work with. If common sense is ignored, however, desiring non-attachment may produce neurotic, self-righteous, repressed ascetics instead of balanced, kind meditators. A tour of any monastery or spiritual community will likely expose you to clear examples of both sides of this delicate balance. So, don't make too much of a problem out of the fact that it seems that one must desire something in order to seek it. This paradox will resolve itself if we are able to experience reality in this moment clearly.

"Craving," "attachment," and "desire" are some of the most

dangerous words that can be used to describe something that is actually much more fundamental than these seem to indicate. The Buddha did talk about these conventional forms of suffering, but he also talked about the fundamental suffering that comes from some deep longing for a refuge that involves a separate or permanent self. We imagine that such a self will be a refuge, and so we desire such a self, we try to make certain sensations into such a self, we cling to the fundamental notion that such a self can exist as a stable entity and that this will somehow help. The side effects of this manifest in all sorts of addictions to mind states and emotions that are not helpful, but these are side effects and not the root that cause of suffering that the Buddha was pointing to.

As stated earlier, a helpful concept here is compassion, a heart aspect of the practice and reality related to kindness. You see, wherever there is desire there is suffering, and wherever there is suffering there is compassion, the desire for the end of suffering. You can actually experience this. So obviously there is some really close relationship 62

between suffering, desire and compassion. This is heavy but good stuff and worth investigating.

We might conceive of this as compassion having gotten caught in a loop, the loop of the illusion of duality. This is sort of like a dog's tail chasing itself. Pain and pleasure, suffering and satisfaction always seem to be "over there." Thus, when pleasant sensations arise, there is a constant, compassionate, deluded attempt to get over there to the other side of the imagined split. This is fundamental attraction. You would think that we would just stop imagining there is a split, but somehow that is not what happens. We keep perpetuating the sense of

a split even as we try to bridge it, and so we suffer. When unpleasant sensations arise, there is an attempt to get away from over there, to widen the imagined split. This will never work, because it doesn't actually exist, but the way we hold our minds as we try to get away from that side is painful. When boring or unpleasant sensations arise, there is the attempt to tune out all together and forget the whole thing, to try to pretend that the sensations on the other side of the split are not there. This is fundamental ignorance and it perpetuates the process, as it is by ignoring aspects of our sensate reality that the illusion of a split is created in the first place.

These strict definitions of fundamental attraction, aversion and ignorance are very important, particularly for when I discuss the various models of the stages of enlightenment. Given the illusion, it seems that somehow these mental reactions will help in a way that will be permanent. Remember that the only thing that will fundamentally help is to understand the Three Characteristics to the degree that makes the difference, and the Three Characteristics are manifesting right here.

Remember how it was stated above that suffering motivates

everything we do? We could also say that everything we do is motivated by compassion, which is part of the fundamentally empty nature of reality. That doesn't mean that everything we do is skillful; that is a whole different issue.

Compassion is a very good thing, especially when it involves one's self and all beings. It is sort of the flip side of the Second Noble Truth.

The whole problem is that "misdirected" compassion, compassion that is filtered through the process of ego and its related habits, can produce enormous suffering and often does. It is easy to think of many examples 63

The Four Noble Truths

of people searching for happiness in the strangest of places and by doing the strangest of things. Just pick up any newspaper. The take-home message is to search for happiness where you are actually likely to find it.

We might say that compassion is the ultimate aspect of desire, or think of compassion and desire on a continuum. The more wisdom or understanding of interconnectedness there is behind our intentions and actions, the more they reflect compassion and the more the results will turn out well. The more greed, hatred and delusion or lack of understanding of interconnectedness there is behind our intentions and actions, the more they reflect desire and the more suffering there will likely be.

This is sometimes referred to as the "Law of Karma," where karma is a word that has to do with our intentions and actions. Some

people can get all caught up in specifics of this that cannot possibly be known, like speculating that if we kill a bug we will come back as a bug and be squished. Don't. Cause and effect, also called interdependence, is just too imponderably complex. Just use this general concept to look honestly at what you want, why, and precisely how you know this.

Examine what the consequences of what you do and think might be for yourself and everyone, and then take responsibility for those consequences. It's a tall order and an important practice to engage in, but don't get too obsessive about it. Remember the simplicity of the first training, training in kindness, generosity, honesty and clarity, and gain balance and wisdom from the other two trainings as you go.

Sometimes looking into suffering and desire can be overwhelming.

Life can sometimes be extremely hard. In these moments, try looking into the heart side of the equation, compassion and kindness. Connect with the part of your heart that just wishes the suffering would end and feel that deeply, especially as it manifests in the body. Just this can be profound practice. There are also lots of other good techniques for cultivating a spaciousness of heart that can bear anything, such as formal loving-kindness practices (see Sharon Salzburg's excellent Lovingkindness, The Revolutionary Art of Happiness). Finding them and practicing them can make the spiritual path much more bearable and pleasant, and this can make it more likely that we will be able to 64

persevere, gain deep insights, be able to integrate them into our lives, and use them to benefit others.

The take-home message is to take the desire to be happy and free of suffering and use its energy to do skillful things that can actually make this happen, rather than getting caught in old unexamined patterns of searching for happiness where you know you will not find it. The Three Trainings are skillful and can inform the whole of our life. By following them we may come to the end of many forms of suffering and be in a much better position to help others do the same.

TRUTH NUMBER THREE: THE END OF SUFFERING

This brings us nicely to the Third Noble Truth, the end of

suf ferin g. Now, as noted before, there are three types of suffering pertaining to the scope of each of the three trainings. Traditionally, the Buddha talked about the end of suffering as relating to mastering the third training and thus becoming highly enlightened. The first point is that it can be done and is done today by meditators like you from many spiritual traditions. Yes, there are enlightened people walking around, and not just a rare few that have spent 20

years in a cave in Tibet. This is really important to understand and have faith in. The other point is that with the end of fundamental desire, which we will render here as the end of compassion and reality being filtered through the odd logic of the process of ego, there is the end of fundamental suffering. That's it. Done is what has to be done. Gone, gone, gone beyond, and all of that. All beings can do it, and there is, to make bit of a mystical joke, no time like the present.

Now, it must be said that the Buddha also praised those who had mastered the other two trainings and thus eliminated what suffering could be eliminated by those methods. Even very enlightened beings can benefit from mastering the concentration states. However, there are some complex and difficult issues related to eliminating all of the ordinary suffering in the world and thus related to mastering the first training, which is an endless undertaking. It is because of this particular issue that such teachings as the Bodhisattva Vow arose, and I will deal with these complexities towards the end of this book.

65

The Four Noble Truths

TRUTH NUMBER FOUR: THE PATH

The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path

t hat

leads to suffering'

s final end . Another list! Hopefully you have

come to like these little lists by now, and so one more will hopefully be seen as another manageable little guide on how to find the end of suffering. Luckily, we have already seen the whole of the Noble Eightfold Path in other parts of some of the other lists, and it is summarized in the Three Trainings of morality, concentration and wisdom.

The morality section is just broken down into three specifics: skillful action, skillful speech and skillful livelihood. Skillful means conducive to the end of suffering for us and for all other living beings. Be kind, honest, clear and compassionate in your whole life, in your actions, speech and work. Notice that nothing is excluded here. The more of our lives we integrate with the spiritual path, the better. Simple to remember and also a powerful guide.

The concentration section contains three things we saw in the Five Spiritual Faculties and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment: skillful energy, skillful concentration, and skillful mindfulness.

The wisdom section has the two last parts of the path: skillful thought or intention and skillful understanding or wisdom. These two are often rendered in different ways, but the meaning is the same: understand the truth of your experience and aspire to kindness and wisdom in your thoughts and deeds. Again, simple but powerful.

9.PRACTICAL MEDITATION CONSIDERATIONS

WHEN, WHERE AND FOR HOW LONG?

The best time to meditate is when you can, as in “get it while you can!” The best place to meditate is where you can, and the best duration is for as long as is available or necessary for you to get what you wish out of it. This may seem like an obvious answer, but people can sometimes get it into their heads that certain times are better than others and thus not meditate when that seemingly sacred time period is unavailable or interrupted. They may feel that certain places or special circumstances (special cushions, noise levels, etc.) are oh-so-necessary, and if these are not available then they may feel frustrated and unable to practice. They may feel that a certain minimal duration of meditation time is necessary, and thus find themselves unable to make use of what time they may have.

If you have two hours each day for meditation, great! If you have two jobs, six kids, and just can’t find more than ten minutes each day for meditation, make good use of what you’ve got. There have been times in my life when I was very grateful that I had twenty hours a day to practice. On the other hand, when I have only had ten minutes a day, I have been grateful for the sense of how precious those ten minutes were. Skillful urgency and well-developed gratitude for a chance to practice at all can allow us to really use limited pieces of time to their fullest.

If you can take off a month each year for intensive retreats, wonderful. If a weekend retreat once a year is all you can do, go for it.

In short, honor where you are and what you can realistically accomplish given your current circumstances. If they are not entirely to your liking, and you want to take more time for practice, work on rearranging things a bit in a way that leaves you with a life that you still find fulfilling should you later decide to practice a bit less.

Luckily, meditation is an extremely portable endeavor. You don’t have to lug around special equipment, have other people around, or schedule an appointment. There are no fees, waiting lists, or red tape.

Reality happens. Sensations arise. If you’re payin’ careful attention to them, really feeling exactly what it is like to be here now, you’re doin’ it!

It’s just that simple.

Practical Meditation Considerations

While I have definitely come to appreciate “ideal” meditation conditions and their obvious benefits, I have also had profound insights and extraordinary experiences in places that would hardly be considered ideal (e.g. in the break room at work, while brushing my teeth). While I definitely appreciate the additional depth of long

periods of uninterrupted practice, I am certain that being able to make use of little bits of time here and there has done much to move things along.

I sometimes meditate when reclining before sleep, when reclining in the morning before I have to get up, when I wake up in the middle of the night, before catnaps on the couch, during boring lectures and meetings, and in the lounge of the school I attended before afternoon classes. I have come to the conclusion that five minutes of really engaged, clear and focused practice in poor circumstances can often produce more benefits for me than an hour of poor, vague and distracted practice in "optimal conditions."

I have also come to appreciate the value of timed sits, where I vow to sit and pay attention for a defined period of time. I take a little travel alarm clock or kitchen timer and vow to sit for a predetermined space of time, usually somewhere from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. I have found that, during untimed sits, I tend to get up when I run into difficult territory, mild pain from sitting, or other things that I don't want to acknowledge and investigate clearly. A timed sit makes it much more likely that I will be able to sit in the face of these things, thus developing more confidence and discipline, as well as the insights that come from persistent investigation.

DAILY LIFE AND RETREATS

A very related issue here is that of the world of retreats and monasticism and how it contrasts with the world of "daily life" or the life of a "householder." Each has its own set of issues, but many of them overlap and the differences may be more question of degree than of dichotomy.

Now, it is true that the battle is not always to the strong, nor the race to the swift, but that's the way to bet. In other words, those who do lots of practice in daily life, go on more and longer retreats, are more consistently able to concentrate and investigate quickly and precisely, pay attention more often during their daily activities, and have their 68

morality trip more together are, on average, much more likely to make progress.

When on retreat, people have the opportunity to practice nearly all day in settings that are usually designed to be very conducive to clear, precise inquiry and depths of meditation. (Why so few people actually take advantage of these circumstances when they go on retreat is beyond me, and I will spend some time ranting about that later.) The point is that going on retreats can give opportunities for much faster and deeper practice to those who choose to really practice. Said another way, if you go on retreat, make good use of that

time.

There is a huge difference between the experiences of people who do retreats halfway and people who really follow the instructions all day long. In my experience, there is no comparison between retreats I have done when I really powered the investigation from the time I awoke until I went to sleep at night, causing fast and profound progress, and when I took breaks here and there to think about things such as my issues and meditation theory, generally causing moderate to slow progress. While many people think that retreats are for more advanced practitioners, I think that a few retreats early in one's practice can really jump start things, allowing one to then make much better use of meditation time off retreat.

I often think of the momentum that retreats generate in terms of rolling a boulder over a hill. If you get a long running start, pushing hard the whole way, you are more likely to be able to get the boulder rolling fast enough so that it rolls over the hill in one straight shot. If you push intermittently or half-heartedly, the boulder is likely to roll back when you get to the steep part of the hill, but you have worn the hill down a little bit, and you may also be a bit stronger for the exercise. Thus, it is possible to wear down the hill given enough time, but it is much faster to simply power over it the first time and move on to the next hill. I know of no obvious benefits from slow practice that fails to gain some footholds in the territory of concentration or insight.

Those who take the wear down the hill approach may eventually lose faith and interest, having done lots of work to little effect. Those who really apply themselves and cross a few hills early on through focused and consistent effort, such as retreats or really solid daily life

practice, will have more of a sense of accomplishment and empowerment, and may have even put in less total time and effort than those who tried to wear down the hill. This irony should not be lost on those who want to be smart about developing their meditative skills.

For example, lets say that you could allocate 365 hours out of one year to formal meditation practice. Given a choice, I would be more inclined to take half of those hours, about 182, and do a 10 day retreat practicing hard and consistently 18 hours a day with minimal breaks at the beginning of the year, and then spend half an hour meditating each of the other days. I would be much more likely to cross into some interesting territory early on and overcome some of the initial hurdles than if I spent one hour each day for that year practicing well. The amount of time and effort is the same, but the

effect is likely to be quite different.

A few odds and ends about retreats. First, retreats tend to have a semi-predictable rhythm to them. Realizing this allows us, if we have the time and resources to space, to choose how long a retreat we want to meet our meditative goals. Even if we are practicing well, the first few days of a retreat tend to be mostly about adjusting to the place, the posture, the routine, the people, the local customs, the schedule, etc.

Similarly, the last day or two of a retreat tends to bring up thoughts of what we are going to do next. Thus, to give yourself some time in the middle when you are not dealing with these things as much, I recommend greater than 5-day retreats when possible. It is not that benefit can't be derived from shorter retreats, but there is something about those middle days that tends to make strong concentration and good practice easier to attain.

Second, every retreat center and tradition has its neurotic shadow aspects and downsides. This is inevitable, but by identifying them and realizing that there are ways to have them not slow our investigation down is helpful. One center where I have spent a bit of time is prone to attracting very serious, scowling people who trudge around in their walking practice like the slightest sound or glance from anyone around them might set them off like a bomb. I have been to another center where sometimes I have been the only meditator there, requiring me to have more self motivation and discipline. Another monastic center I 70

have been to has the whole male hierarchy thing going which can cause all sorts of reactions from retreatants both female and male.

Then there are basically always neurotic things around food (huge topic, of which vegetarian vs. non-vegetarian is just the tip of the iceberg), bathrooms, quarters, showers, hot water, washing clothes and dishes, cleaning duties, heating and cooling (one place I have been to has cantankerous wood stoves in some buildings for heat, another in a tropical setting has open windows that let the mosquitoes swarm in), clothing (e.g. some centers have people wear white, others won't tolerate skimpy or revealing outfits, some don't care), fragrances, chemical sensitivities, incense, morning wake-up bells (too quiet, too loud, someone forgets to ring it at all), schedules, roommates (particularly those that snore, smell, are noisy or messy, etc.), strictness of silence, eye contact or the lack thereof, etiquette around teachers (e.g. to bow or not, to ask challenging questions or not, limits on the time we have access to them, their personalities and neurotic stuff, whether or not they speak the language we speak, etc.), etiquette of entering rooms with icons (e.g. whether to bow three

times or not), the presence of icons or not (and which icons), and issues of the orthodoxy of ritual, dogma, posture, hand position, eating rituals, chanting, vows, etc.

This list doesn't include issues of corruption, romances, cults of personality, affairs, crushes, miscommunications, vendettas, scandals, drug use, money issues, and all the other things that can sometimes show up anywhere there are people. In short, whatever you imagine that you or other people might have issues around, these are bound to show up sooner or later if you spend enough time in spiritual circles or retreat centers. While solo practice is an option, that doesn't get you away from all of these issues and has its own set of downsides.

The crucial thing is to realize that great practice can occur in conditions far from perfect, particularly if we realize that all the sensations that make up these inputs and our reactions to them are all worthy of investigation and thus as much a source of ultimate and often relative wisdom as any other sensations. I have rarely had what I considered perfect practice conditions, but I have done well and you can also. That said, some centers, particular retreats, and teachers are better than others, and it is worth exploring and asking around. All these 71

Practical Meditation Considerations

things can be particularly distracting and distressing for a first time retreatant, as often there are some naïve hopes, however

unacknowledged, of walking into the Garden of Eden, sitting with the Buddha, and hanging out with the most evolved fellow retreatants one could imagine.

When off retreat, progress is still possible, particularly if one has used retreats to get past some of the initial hurdles (hills) and get a few tastes of what is possible. Do not underestimate the value of careful and honest awareness of what one is going during one's life off the cushion.

On the other hand, if you want to significantly increase your chances of tasting the fruits of the path, do your best to make time for retreats in a way that honors your spiritual goals as well as your other commitments.

One of the reasons for monasticism is that your commitments become your practice, but there are plenty of people who have figured out how to live in the world and use retreats and strong daily practice to achieve the same effects. In fact, in this unusual time in history, there are plenty of places to sit for very little money and get great support for practice without having to deal with all the ritual, dogma and other hassles that are involed in ordination.

Some of my favorite places to go on retreat are: The Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, MA, Bhavana Society in Highview,

West Virginia, The Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre (MBMC) in Penang, Malaysia, and Gaia House near Totnes, England. Also worth mentioning are the Mahasi centers in Burma (Myanmar), such as Panditarama in Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon). All of these are easy to find on the Internet. For those who are really into Mahasi Sayadaw style practice as I am, the Three Month Retreat at IMS (about $3000), or a few weeks to months at MBMC (about $1000 to fly there and then a few bucks a day plus donations to stay) are highly recommended. Both have excellent food and are very conducive to great practice. It is amazing the things we spend our time and money doing. As a good friend once said, "If you had to flip burgers for 13

years to get up the money to do the three month at IMS, it would be well worth it." I prefer MBMC for cultural reasons, but both are great.

Burma is a great place to go for the real deal, but there are some issues around dealing with the government, the oily food, the culture, the 72

water, the heat, the parasites, and the malaria-carrying mosquitoes that need to be strongly considered.

POSTURES

The four postures for meditation that are mentioned in traditional Buddhist practice are those of sitting, walking, standing and reclining.

Each has its own set of benefits and drawbacks, and each may be useful at one time or another. Looked at another way, this means that we can meditate in just about any position we find ourselves. We can be aware of where we are, what we are doing, and what our experience feels like all day long. Which posture we choose doesn't really matter from a pure insight point of view, but there are some practical reasons why we might choose one or the other for formal practice. Posture choice is mostly about finding one that works in our current circumstances and which matches our current energy level.

Reclining practice has the advantages of being extremely sustainable, not requiring attention to maintaining a posture, generally being relatively free from pain, and of really allowing the attention to turn to subtle sensations. It has the distinct disadvantage of quickly putting many people to sleep, and thus most people prefer sitting. A few people, such as myself, are so naturally wired that they can meditate clearly when reclining most of the time and may sometimes find sitting just a bit too intense and edgy. How one will react to the energetic quality of a posture varies with the individual, the phase of practice and practical considerations such as how much sleep we got the night before. It usually doesn't take much experimentation to let us know if reclining will work for us or not.

Sitting is the classic meditation pose, but it is not so special as some would make it out to be. I will use the phrase “on the cushion” often in this book, but I do so because I find it catchy and not because there is something magical about the sitting posture. When I write “on the cushion,” I am really referring to formal meditation in any of these four postures.

Sitting has the quality of being more energy-producing than reclining and less energy-producing than walking and standing. It can also be very stable once we learn to sit well. However, many people find that learning to sit well is a whole endeavor in and of itself. There are lots of 73

Practical Meditation Considerations

postures even within the category of sitting, e.g. in a chair with our back off the backrest or with our back on the back rest, in lotus position, in half-lotus position, sitting “Indian Style” with our legs crossed, in the

“Burmese” or “friendly” position which is like the cross-legged position except that our feet are both on the floor one in front of the other, in a keeling position with or without a bench, etc.

Many traditions make a big deal about exactly how you should sit, with some getting particularly macho or picky about such things, but in the end it doesn’t matter so much. The things that seem to matter most are that you can sustain the posture, that your back be fairly straight so that you can breathe well, and that you are not permanently hurting yourself. Aches and pains are common in meditation, but if they persist for a long time after you get up from sitting, particularly in your knees, seriously consider modifying your sitting posture.

Standing is an even more energy-producing posture than sitting, with the obvious advantage being that is it even harder to fall asleep when standing than when sitting. It seems to up the intensity of a meditation session even more and can be useful when the energy is really low. I recommend standing with the eyes slightly open to avoid falling over, though some people can do just fine with their eyes closed. If you are sitting and finding that you simply cannot stay focused and awake, try standing.

Walking is the most energetically active of the four postures and also provides a nice stretch for the joints and back after we have been doing a lot of sitting. Its strengths are its weaknesses, in that the fact that one is moving around can make it easier to stay present and also lead to a lack of stable concentration. Some people consider walking practice to be very secondary to sitting, but I have learned from experience that walking meditation should be given just as much respect as sitting meditation. Whether we walk fast or slow is really

not so important, but that while walking we investigate all the little sensations that go into walking is. This is a great time to check out intentions and their relationship to actions, as walking involves a complex and interesting interplay between these. If you are having problems staying grounded when walking, I recommend staying primarily with the physical 74

Practical Meditation Considerations

sensations in the feet and legs, particularly the sensations of contact between the feet and the ground or floor.

OBJECTS FOR INSIGHT PRACTICES

As mentioned before, there are lots of insight traditions and they each have their favorite objects. Whereas from the point of view of pure insight the object of meditation doesn't matter, as with postures there are some other practical considerations related to our particular abilities and the current phase of our practice that are worth taking into account.

It should be noted here that no objects are inherently objects for insight practice versus concentration practice. The difference is whether or not we investigate the Three Characteristics of those objects or ignore the fact that the object is made up of individual sensations and thus artificially solidify it. Thus, you could use any of the objects mentioned below (as well as many others) for either type of practice.

The first question is whether or not one has a particular agenda for what kind of sensations or focus one wishes to include in the practice, i.e. whether one wants to do "choiceless awareness" practice or a more structured practice. Choiceless awareness practice, in which one investigates whatever arises without a more specific focus, has the advantage of being very inclusive and "natural," and yet by the same token some people can easily get distracted and ungrounded when they don't take a more structured approach.

For those taking a more structured approach, the axes one can move on are the degree to which one includes physical or mental sensations in meditation, whether or not one focuses narrowly or uses a more open field of attention, and whether or not one moves the attention around or keeps it in about the same place.

The primary advantage of trying to focus primarily on physical sensations, such as the breath, the sensations of walking, the points of contact with the floor, or the sensations of our physical body in general, is that they are much less seductive than mental sensations. Mental sensations tend to trap us in the content and stories, as anyone who has ever tried to meditate knows all to well. The more mental sensations we include in our practice, the more of our emotional and psychological stuff we will encounter. This can be a mixed blessing. If

our practice is very strong, we can enter such territory and yet still see the true nature 75

of all of the sensations that make it up. If our practice is not very strong, we will simply be swamped, lost in the habitual patterns of thinking associated with our “stuff.”

Thus, physical sensations help us ground ourselves, and mental sensations open us up to plunging into the depths of mental life or getting lost in it. From a pure insight point of view, neither one is more holy or more of a source of truth. However, when we do the experiment we will quickly realize what works for us; “works” in this case meaning that we can keep seeing the true nature of the numerous quick sensations that make up our reality.

There are numerous other types of physical objects that may be investigated, including sounds, sights, and even smells and tastes. Some people have a natural proclivity for investigating the sensations of a particular sense door. There is a monk in Burma that recommends his students use the high-pitched tones in our ear as an object, and sometimes I have found them very useful and interesting. Rather than seeming to be a continuous tone, we can hear each little individual sensation of ringing as a discontinuous entity. We may also take sights as object, such as the colors on the back of our eyelids or, if our eyes are open, whatever visual sensations present themselves. These are also impermanent, and if we are good at this we may even see our visual world presenting itself like the frames of a movie.

Another consideration is whether to use a narrow or broad focus of attention. The advantage of a more narrow focus of attention is that it may exclude many distractions. We may get very good at seeing certain selected types of objects, such as the sensations of breathing in the abdomen or at the tip of the nose, and this is just fine and even a very good idea. Such one pointed practice is routinely recommended, and some people, such as myself, have a natural inclination towards this style.

Others find that this makes them too tight and irritable. However, they find that they do much better with a wider and more inclusive field of attention. These things vary with the person and the situation, and if we are honest with ourselves we will be able to know what is working for us and what is not. The advantage of a wide field of attention is that we need to put less effort into staying focused and can be more present to 76

whatever arises naturally. The downside is that we may become very lazy meditators and get lost in thought. These tradeoffs must be weighed against each other.

There are practices, such as body sweeping, that keep the attention moving all the time. This can be very helpful, as it keeps us engaged with new and interesting sensations and may keep us from getting into ruts of thinking that we are staying with new sensations when really we are just remembering old patterns. However, these practices have the downside that they can sometimes lack the real precision of honest attention that comes from staying with more restricted areas of focus.

We can end up giving more attention to keeping our attention moving than to clearly investigating what our attention reveals. Again, some people do well with moving attention practices and some seem to thrive on keeping the attention in one place.

It should be noted that we may not always know exactly what is best for us. We may pick practices that feel good to us precisely because they don't hit too closely, don't allow us to clearly investigate the disconcerting truths of impermanence and suffering, don't hit at our sense of identity in a way that really cuts to the bone. We might also pick traditions that are grueling and very painful for us because we imagine that this is what is important, even if such traditions do not facilitate clear investigations of the truth of our actual experience. Thus, working with good teachers who can advise us and help us keep from resting in our delusions is recommended. That said, some teachers only teach one practice, usually the particular one that worked for them. If that is also a technique that genuinely works for us, then we are set. If not, we may wish to investigate other traditions and techniques.

On a related note, I have advocated figuring out what works for you, considering how you are built and where you are. I do, however, recommend moderation in this. For instance, if you sit down to meditate and then decide that you are just a bit sleepy, so you stand up, and then you settle down a bit, so a few minutes later you sit down again. Then a minute later you decide you really don't like that little pain in your knee and so you lie down, and so it goes. Such practice is likely to be of little benefit to you, so try to pick a posture and stick with it within reason. The same applies to objects of meditation, particularly 77

when you are starting out. There is a lot to be said for cultivating this basic level of self-control and discipline. Without it, we can end up shifting our practice habits every time our investigation begins to hit close to home.

RESOLVE

That brings me to the topic of resolve. I strongly recommend developing the freedom to choose what happens in your life that

comes from discipline. While people often think of discipline as being contrary to freedom, I equate the two in many ways. Discipline and resolve allow one to make choices about what we do and stay strong in the face of difficulties. Thus, I recommend that when you set aside a period of time for a particular training, you resolve that for that period you will work on the specific training you have set out to work on, and that you will work on it whole-heartedly.

Without discipline, without formal resolve, you may easily find yourself in something resembling the following situation. You sit down on the cushion with the vague intention to do some insight practices, and begin trying to investigate, but soon you find yourself thinking about how you really should be paying your bills. Then your knee begins to hurt, so you tune into the low-level jhanic bliss that you have managed to cultivate the ability to find, and then you feel hungry, so you get up and fix yourself a sandwich. You then think to yourself, "Hey, what am I doing here eating this sandwich? Wasn't I doing insight practice?"

You are not free. Instead, you are floundering. Without discipline, without resolve, you are unlikely to be able to get past some of the difficult hurdles that stand between you and success in any of these trainings.

I have found it extremely valuable, particularly when sitting down to do formal meditation, to state to myself at the beginning of the session exactly what I am doing, what I hope to attain by it, and why attaining that is a good idea. I do this formally and clearly, either out loud or silently to myself. Having done practice with and without them, I have come to the definite conclusion that formal resolutions can make a huge difference in my practice. One of my favorite resolutions goes something like, "I resolve that for this hour I will consistently investigate 78

Practical Meditation Considerations

the sensations that make up reality so as to attain to liberating insights for the benefit of myself and all beings."

Resolutions such as this one add a great deal of focus and

consciousness to my practice. They galvanize my energy, make plain my intentions, and also seem to work at some more subliminal or subconscious level to help keep me on track. I have also found that I can use resolutions in my daily life to good effect. For instance, when studying for a medical school exam, I might resolve, "For this hour, I will study this hematology syllabus so that I will increase my knowledge and skill as an aspiring doctor and thus be less likely to kill patients and more likely to help them."

Such resolutions might seem overly formal or perhaps even goofy, and they sometimes seem this way to me, but I have come to

appreciate them anyway. If I make resolutions that do not ring true, I can feel it when I say them, and this helps me understand my own path and heart.

If I am lost and wondering why I am doing what I am doing, these sorts of resolutions help me to consciously reconnect with what is important in life. I suggest that you try making these sorts of resolutions in your own life, at least so that you can see if they are useful for you. I am a big fan of formal resolutions, but you should see for yourself.

TEACHERS

There are many types of teachers out there from many traditions.

Some are very ordinary and some seem to radiate spirituality from every pore. Some are nice, some are indifferent, and some may seem like sergeants in boot camp. Some stress reliance on one's own efforts, others stress reliance on the grace of the guru. Some are very available and accessible, and some may live far away, grant few interviews, or have so many students vying for their time that you may rarely get a chance to talk with them. Some seem to embody the highest ideals of the perfected spiritual life in their every waking moment, while others may have many noticeable quirks, faults and failings. Some live by rigid moral codes, while others may push the boundaries of social

conventions and mores. Some may be very old, and some may be very young. Some may require strict commitments and obedience, while others may hardly seem to care what we do at all. Some may advocate very specific practices, stating that their way is the only way or the best 79

Practical Meditation Considerations

way, while others may draw from many traditions or be open to your doing so. Some may point out our successes, while others may dwell on our failures.

Some may stress renunciation or even ordination into a monastic order, while others seem relentlessly engaged with "the world." Some charge a bundle for their teachings, while others give theirs freely. Some like scholarship and the lingo of meditation, while others may never use or even openly despise these formal terms and conceptual frameworks.

Some teachers may be more like friends or equals that just want to help us learn something they happened to be good at, while others may be all into the hierarchy, status and role of being a teacher. Some teachers will speak openly about attainments, and some may not. Some teachers are remarkably predictable in their manner and teaching style, while others swing wide in strange and unpredictable ways. Some may seem very tranquil and mild mannered, while others

may seem outrageous or rambunctious. Some may seem extremely humble and unimposing, while others may seem particularly arrogant and presumptuous. Some are charismatic, while others may be distinctly lacking in social skills.

Some may readily give us extensive advice, and some just listen and nod. Some seem the living embodiment of love, and others may piss us off on a regular basis. Some teachers may instantly click with us, while others just leave us cold. Some teachers may be willing to teach us, and some may not.

So far as I can tell, none of these are related in any way to their meditation ability or the depths of their understanding. That is, don't judge a meditation teacher by their cover. What is important is that their style and personality inspire us to practice well, to live the life we want to live, to find what it is we wish to find, to understand what we wish to understand. Some of us may wander for a long time before we find a good fit. Some of us will turn to books for guidance, reading and practicing without the advantages or hassles of teachers. Some of us may seem to click with a practice or teacher, try to follow it for years and yet get nowhere. Others seem to fly regardless. One of the most interesting things about reality is that we get to test it out. One way or another, we will get to see what works for us and what doesn't, what happens when 80

Practical Meditation Considerations

we do certain practices or follow the advice of certain teachers, as well as what happens when we don't.

Another thing about teachers is that they only know what they know.

If we use the scopes of the Three Trainings to examine this, we may find that some teachers may have a good grasp of some of these scopes and not have a good grasp of the others. In fact, mastery in any area guarantees nothing about mastery of the others. It is worth being realistic about this fact, and so I will go on and on about this later.

Also, when we interact with teachers, we may wish to also consider which of their bodies of knowledge we wish to draw on, i.e. which of the Three Trainings we want help with. In fact, I think that it is very important to be clear about this explicitly, so that when we go in to talk with a teacher, we can ask questions from the correct conceptual framework and also fit their advice back into the correct framework. If we ask a teacher about how to attain to some high state and they mention tuning into boundless joy, and we then try to do this when driving to work and crash into the rear end of the car of some poor commuter, we have not followed their advice properly.

Similarly, we may wish to explicitly ask our teachers if they are skilled in the aspect of the specific training we are interested in

mastering and also to what level. While you cannot always trust them to tell the truth, either through their own self-deception or the desire to fool you, if they do say something like, “No, I don’t know enough to speak on that level, as my own abilities are not that strong yet,” then at least you know to seek advice elsewhere. I have much more respect for a teacher who once told me that he didn’t feel qualified to teach me than for the numerous teachers who were not qualified to teach me who either didn’t realize this or tried to pretend otherwise.

Also, I would recommend making your goals for your life and practice specific. For instance, you may wish to get a job as a dishwasher so that you can continue to feed yourself. You go to the meditation teacher and say, “I want to get a job as a dishwasher. Do you know how to do this?”

They may say, “Yes.”

To which you could reply, “How do you know this?”

They could just as easily have said, “I have no idea, as I am a meditation teacher, not a career counselor or restaurant manager.”

The same basic conversational pattern could be repeated just as easily for the other two trainings. For instance, you could ask a meditation teacher, “I wish to learn how to get into the early concentration states. Do you know how to do this?”

You could also ask, “I wish to attain to the first stage of enlightenment. Do you know how to do this?”

If they say, “Yes,” the next question would be, “What are the specific steps that will likely produce that result?”

This sort of straightforward approach to spirituality is extremely pragmatic and empowering. Further, it makes interactions with teachers more fruitful.

This brings me to another point: teachers can generally tell if you are serious and if you have clearly thought through what you want. For instance, it takes about two seconds of someone asking a meditation teacher for advice on their emotional stuff for the teacher to realize that this person is interested on working on conventional happiness and is not interested in learning insight practices. Similarly, it takes few conversations with a student to figure out if they are following your advice or not, so don’t try to fool them. If you don’t like their advice, better to tell them that and also why so that they can address this, either by modifying their advice or by further explaining why they feel their advice might be helpful.

Further, if you follow some of their advice but change parts, or select parts and add on other things, and then find that this way of working has not produced the desired results, be careful about

criticizing the teacher or the method, as you have not done the experiment they recommended. For instance, if someone told you to stabilize your attention on the individual sensations that make up the experience of breathing so clearly that you can see the beginning and ending of every single sensation consistently for an hour, and instead you do something else or stop the practice before you can do this, don't blame them if you do not get the results they promised. Barring insurmountable external circumstances, the choice not to do the work was clearly yours, and thus you should accept personal responsibility for 82

your own failure. I am not trying to be harsh but simply realistic. I am obviously a firm believer that people should take responsibility for what happens in their lives and practices. Not doing so is tantamount to disempowering yourself.

While all of this advice on practices and teachers may seem a bit overwhelming, reconnecting with the basics, the simple truths of the spiritual life, is highly recommended. To that end…

83

10.SUMMARY

The more we practice being kind and compassionate, the more we connect with the fundamental nature of our hearts and the better our conventional lives will be.

The more we practice being clear and equanimous, the more we connect with the true nature of our mind and the healthier our minds will be.

The more we practice understanding the Three Characteristics of all the little sensations that make up our reality, the more we penetrate into the fundamental nature of reality and the closer we are to awakening and to freedom from fundamental suffering.

84

11.CONCLUSION TO PART I

People have noticed a decrease in the importance of poetry to our society. It has been said that our desire for more information, faster images and quick sound bites is increasing. We are searching faster and faster, perhaps at the expense of looking more deeply.

Rather than sitting with a Shakespeare sonnet for a few minutes, just pondering the beauty and meaning of it, we might read ten of them quickly and then feel a bit befuddled. Similarly, one might read though a dense little work like this one without stopping to ponder each paragraph along the way and thus perhaps get little out of it. Just so, we may be constantly trying to find the next teacher, book, spiritual scene, technique, incense, mantra, costume, or doctrine that will get us the Big E. Quick results are actually possible, though there

are no promises about the speed of progress that can be given. Real progress will only come when we settle into the basics, into this moment, and go deep.

These lists are good sources of the basic teachings that are sufficient to do the trick. Go deeply into them, or find them in another form, perhaps in another tradition, and go deeply into them. Slow down.

Settle into these simple truths, reflect, and then practice with diligence!

Good teachers can help; they are nearly a necessity and so are highly recommended, but you must do the work yourself. You must

understand, and then you will have to do this again and again. Get used to it, as it can be quite an adventure.

It is sometimes hard for people to believe that right there in their experience is what they are looking for. It is right here, right now, in your own experience, in your own heart, mind and body. It is these sensations right now that are just soaked with the truth.

Forgive me, but one more time up on my soapbox. There is so

much completely useless and harmful sectarianism in the spiritual world, within Buddhism and between Buddhism and the other spiritual traditions. People can get so into their particular trip and get all down on the other perfectly good spiritual trips. This is faith out of balance causing rigid adherence to dogma, isn't it? This is a lack of understanding of what the basics are and what are just the inevitable cultural trappings and individual emphases of each tradition.

These are the basics. Wherever you find a tradition with the components of even one of these lists, regardless of what they are called or how they are formulated, you find a tradition with the potential to awaken. Sure, there is a lot of junk spirituality out there, but there is also a lot of really good stuff.

Again, each tradition has its strengths and weaknesses, and some may have cultural trappings and ornamentation that you like or don't like, but don’t make a big deal about this.

Instead, keep the basics in the front of your mind. Each valid tradition can help us gain further insight into the truth, and perhaps we will resonate with one teaching or tradition at one time and another some time later. Alternately, we can pick one tradition, not be sectarian about it, and go deep into it, into the simplicity and clarity of its basics, using its extrapolations, elaborations and interpretations to go back more deeply into the simple truths. We can engage with the ordinary world, with the truth of this moment, and this will empower us and may awaken us.

May this writing be of benefit to you and all beings, and may you and all beings realize the simple truth of things in this lifetime.

86

PART II: LIGHT AND SHADOWS

87

12.INTRODUCTION TO PARTS II & III

Some chapters in Parts II and III have a distinctly cutting tone. This is intentional, though no harm is meant by it. There are a lot of shadow sides to Buddhism and mystical traditions in general, some of which will be discussed here. Perhaps a more cutting tone will help to illuminate points that tend to be unmentioned or poorly addressed. Perhaps it will also serve to spark skillful debate and inquiry, rather than causing needless contraction into fear and dogma. However, I should warn you now, some of the next three chapters have quite a bite to them. There is no information in those chapters that is essential to any of the basic practices. If you are not in the mood for some really heavy and scathing social commentary on Western Buddhism, please, skip to the chapter called A Clear Goal now!

The practical reason for including Part II at all is that what often happens between trying to apply the basics of technical meditation discussed in Part I and the successful entry into real meditation territory discussed in Part III is that we run into the mainstream culture of Western Buddhism and the communities that develop around it. We need support, friends who are into what we are into, good teachers and places to practice. We wish to be in the company of fellow adventurers rather than lone wanderers in strange lands. Unfortunately, much of what we find is not particularly conducive to adventure and deep exploration at all.

Thus, as one small dissenting voice against the tide, I have included Part II to help those who want to go much deeper than most of those around them and avoid the numerous cultural sidetracks and

disempowering voices that will keep them from their goals. It is as much a laundry list of my pet peeves as it is anything else, but I am happy to own my neuroses and make them overt. While I may be fooling myself, I think this section, while a bit harsh and probably disrespectful, is likely to be helpful to someone who also wishes to go against the grain and become an actual meditation master.

The real dangers that come from using a cutting tone are that it will alienate both readers for whom such a tone is simply not helpful and those who could really benefit from such a tone but do not want to admit this. Worse, it may cause others to agree too strongly, thinking,

Introduction to Parts II & III

“Oh, yes, even though that Daniel fellow sometimes writes like a

raving lunatic, he and I are really on the same side. We know what is going on.

Those over there are the ones who really need to hear this."

We all need to hear the points made in this book, myself included, though not necessarily in the style presented here. The ideals and standards presented in this book are very high so that they will be able to be applied universally. Further, the numerous traps and pitfalls presented in this book are also so common that all of us need to be wary, reflecting regularly and honestly on how we have fallen into them once more.

There are quite a number of very readable, helpful and friendly dharma books out there, e.g. Jack Kornfield's encyclopedic masterwork, A Path with Heart, many of which are loaded with brilliant statements that should basically shock and confound the reader, hitting at the very core of their sense of identity with the deadly accuracy of a Master of Zen Archery. However, as they have been written in a style that is so completely accessible, these statements have nearly the opposite effect, creating a mushy comfort in the reader with statements that should have stopped them in their proverbial tracks and provoked deep inquiry.

I have grown tired of people routinely quoting profound dharma statements from such works as if this represents their understanding when they have no idea what they mean. They seem to derive some false comfort from being able to parrot the masters. While I can understand the appeal of behaving in such ways, as I have done so myself on numerous occasions, I will do my best to keep the second two parts of this book from contributing to this phenomena. Thus, I have intentionally written some sections of Parts II and III in a style that is designed to sound combative and abrasive. Also, I must admit that it was fun to write that way.

It should be noted that if you got through Part I (which I tried to make very "accessible") without being stunned at the staggering profundity of the statements made on nearly every page, then you either have no need to read this book or you fell into the trap I just mentioned above. I think that most spiritual practitioners could and should become very much more comfortable admitting what they don't know and 89

seeking clarification. The times when I myself have failed to do so have been much to my detriment.

In these next two parts, I will often mention very specific high states and attainments for the purpose of attempting in some small way to refocus Buddhism on those things that go far beyond philosophy, psychology, and dogmatic religion. It is full enlightenment

that finally makes the difference and was, according to the Buddha himself, the whole reason for all of this. Unfortunately, even fairly rational adults can suddenly lose the ability to stay in touch with ordinary reality when such language is used, and I will do my best to try to counteract this and bring things back down to Earth whenever possible.

It has become almost taboo to mention actual attainment or mastery of this stuff among many meditation communities, and this is grossly unfortunate, which is to say it is completely ridiculous and frighteningly ironic. Some reasons for this will be touched on occasionally, as well as some of what might be able to be done about this. However, if we are to have a clear standard for whether or not these techniques and teachings are working for us, it is vital that we have a thorough knowledge of what is possible and even expected of those who really practice well. That is the primary reason for Part III. Remember, you are reading a book called Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha. It has been written on the assumption that its readers actually want to do this.

That said, there will probably be readers who will think that most of what is written in Part III, which details the stages of enlightenment, the high concentration attainments, and even more unusual territory, is pure fantasy, myth, dogma and nonsense. I have little to say to these readers except that this book is obviously not written for them.

I hope that you will realize the difficulties inherent in language, concepts, doctrines, and maps of spiritual terrain. They are particularly clumsy tools even when used to their fullest potential, and this is unlikely to have happened here. Despite the fact that I will often use a tone implying certainty, it should be said that nothing whatsoever that I have written here is absolutely true. Language at its best is a useful tool, though by its very nature it artificially divides, reduces and over-simplifies. Hopefully, one will concern oneself with what is pragmatic rather than what is absolutely correct from some arbitrary point of view.

The crucial thing is practice and direct experience for one's self. Once you understand for yourself, you will be able to laugh knowingly at my efforts.

13.BUDDHISM VS. THE BUDDHA *

One of my teachers once commented, "Buddhism and the

teachings of the Buddha have been at odds for 2,500 years!" These are cynical but appropriate words. What the Buddha taught was

really extremely simple and, as a practice, particularly unglamorous and generally quite difficult though manageable. If one has a chance to read the original texts, one sees again and again that what the Buddha taught was generally practical and as non-dogmatic as could be expected. He basically said, “Do these very specific things, and these specific results will happen.” He had little use for ritual, ceremony or philosophy that was not for some practical purpose.

Now, it is true that things did get a bit more complex and religious in the later years of his teaching as The Vinaya, or code of conduct for monks, was established. The Buddha said that the added rules and regulations were a response to the increased quantity of low-quality students with whom he had to work in the later years of his life and the problems inherent in running a large organization. After the Buddha died, however, the process of turning the teachings of the Buddha from a practical path for awakening into a number of ritualistic religions reached new extremes of dogma and division. It is also true, however, that many worthwhile and practical variations on the fundamental teachings and techniques have been added that have provided great benefit to many of those who actually followed them rather than just talked about them.

In general, as mystical teachings become religions, all sorts of things get added on to them depending on the prevailing cultural norms, the current government’s attitude towards the teachings, how well or poorly the teachings are understood by those teaching them, and economic pressures. Christianity as a dogma (rather than as a mystical tradition or set of spiritual practices, e.g. sitting in the desert for 40 days, facing one’s demons, and finding God) is a just one scary example of this, but perhaps no scarier than the religions of Buddhism. Just as Christianity often seems to have little to do with what Jesus was talking about (and practically nothing to do with doing the practices he did or living the kind of life he did) just so Buddhism often seems to have largely forgotten about the core teachings of the Buddha. As Buddhism enters

Buddhism vs. The Buddha

America, a whole new layer of cultural dust is being added to it, most of which is related to the shadow sides of Western psychology and those of the New Age movement. However, there are also signs that fresh new life and health is being breathed into aspects of Buddhism that had become somewhat moldy and calcified in their countries of origin.

The extra trappings are not necessarily all harmful in and of themselves, but they may dilute the amount of practical information about how to awaken with all sorts of other information that may have little to do with awakening and may even be an impediment to

it. This may then lead to less than complete emphasis on the three fundamental trainings in morality, concentration and wisdom, which are quite a handful and a great undertaking even in their most simple forms. I was extremely lucky, in that I learned some great Buddhist meditation technology long before I really got to know the culture of mainstream Western Buddhism. I have much use for the former, and as for the latter, well, read on.

It is true that Buddhist training can take on many valid forms, and this is a fine and beautiful thing, as different training methods may be appropriate for different meditators at different times. The added

"padding" of tradition and religion can be a comfort and a support, as most people seem to really like having some kind of dogmatic, mythical or cultural foundation from which to work.

Traditions and standardized conceptual frameworks can also

provide the means by which people can talk to each other about experiences and techniques that might otherwise be very hard to explain clearly. I have a friend from another mystical tradition who knows much that I find useful and interesting, but it took us months to even begin to line up our terminology so that we could benefit from each other's understanding.

However, these conceptual frameworks and trappings may also

produce the huge amount of useless, harmful and divisive sectarianism that exists within Buddhism and between the various meditative or mystical traditions, as well as all sorts of effort going into things that produce no freedom and may cause other forms of suffering.

Every time I leave my sheltered little academic life and enter the rough and tumble world of endlessly petty, sectarian dharma scenes, I

am again astounded at how fixated people can be on the minute differences between their tradition and traditions that are so similar to theirs they can only be differentiated by the clothes people wear and the names they call things. I can't tell you how tiring it is. Sometimes I wonder how these otherwise kind and reasonable people can stand themselves or each other when they are like that. We all want to be special, but I beg you, find a way to be special that allows others to be special also. It is what is common to the great mystical paths that makes them special. The differences are 100% guaranteed to be fundamentally irrelevant. Now, that said, I am going to turn around and bust on cultural aspects of traditions that are not into awakening and mastering what the Buddha was talking about. This is Buddhism, after all, and so it seems only natural that I should be into what the

old boy was into.

I have heard way too many conversations between members of

differing mystical traditions that could be summarized, “My dogma and ideals are better than your dogma and ideals.” Even worse are the rare and astonishing conversations that might be summarized, “My dogma and ideals are better than your actual realizations and profound insights.” Frightening.

There is a movement in the West, reminiscent of the original objectives of the Buddha in the early days of his teaching, to divorce Buddhism’s core meditation technology and basic trainings from religion and ritual entirely. I am a great fan of this movement, so long it does not cause people to throw out too many of the original Buddhist conceptual frameworks that are helpful as tools for mastering these practices. There is also a movement in the West to take the meditative technology of Buddhism and integrate it into everything from Catholicism to psychiatry to the freakish fringe of the New Age. I don’t have a problem with this trend particularly, just as long as people realize that you could just as easily divorce these technologies from those traditions and have something that is still very useful and powerful.

There is another related movement in the West, and that is to make Buddhism into something for everyone. Unfortunately, what is happening is that Buddhism is becoming watered down in order to make it have broad appeal. The result is something very similar to what happens in places like Thailand, where most people “practice 94

Buddhism vs. The Buddha

Buddhism” in a way that is largely devotional and dogmatic. In the West, this translates to people “practicing Buddhism” by becoming neurotic about being Buddhist, accumulating lots of pretty books and expensive props, learning just enough of some new language to be pretentious, and by sitting on a cushion engaged in free-form psychological whatnot while doing nothing resembling meditative practices. They may aspire to no level of mastery of anything and may never even have been told what these practices were actually designed to achieve.

Thus, their meditation is largely a devotional meditation, something that externally looks like meditation but achieves little. In short, it is just one more spiritual trapping, though one that may have some social benefits. Many seem to have substituted the pain of the pew for the pain of the zafu with the results and motivations being largely the same. It is an imitation of meditation done because meditation seems like a good and noble thing to do. However, it is a meditation that has been designed by those “teachers” who want everyone to be able to feel good that they are doing something

"spiritual". While it is good for a person to slow down to take time out for silence, I will claim that beyond these and a few cardiovascular benefits there is often not a whole lot of any great worth that comes from this sort of practice. True, they are not out smoking crack, but why get so close to the real thing and then not do those practices that make a real difference?

Many will consider my devaluation of low-grade sitting practice radical and counterproductive. Perhaps it is, but I claim that many who would have aspired to much more are being short-changed by not being invited to really step up to the plate and play ball, to discover the profound capabilities hidden within their own minds. This book is designed to be just such an invitation, an invitation to step far beyond the increasingly ritualized, bastardized, and gutless mock-up of Buddhism that is rearing its fluffy head in the modern West and has a strangle hold on many a practice group and even some of the big meditation centers.

To be fair, it is true that spiritual trappings and cultural add-ons may, at their best, be "skillful means," ways of making difficult teachings more accessible and ways of getting more people to practice correctly 95

Buddhism vs. The Buddha

and in a way that will finally bring realization. A fancy hat or a good ritual can really inspire some people. That said, it is lucky that one of the fundamental "defilements" that drops away at first awakening is attachment to rites and rituals, i.e. Buddhism, ceremony, specific techniques, and religious and cultural trappings in general.

Unfortunately, the cultural inertia of the religions of Buddhism is hard to entirely circumvent.

It need not be, if the trappings can serve as "skillful means," but I assert that many more people could be much more careful about what are fundamentally helpful teachings and what causes division, confusion, and sectarian arrogance. Those who aren't careful about this are at least demonstrating in a roundabout way that they don't know what the fundamental teachings are for themselves and have attained little wisdom.

96

14.CONTENT AND ULTIMATE REALITY *

There is too much content-centered Buddhism and content-

centered spirituality in general. It is not that content isn't important, but it is only half of the picture, and the half we are already quite familiar with and typically stuck in. By content, I mean everything except determined effort to realize the full truth of the Three Characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and no-self, i.e. to realize ultimate reality.

Perhaps two illustrations will help.

The first odd phenomenon I have noticed is that when students of meditation gather together to discuss Buddhism, they almost never talk about actual meditation practices in depth and detail. They almost never talk about their diligent attempts to really understand these teachings in each moment. It is almost an unacknowledged taboo that nearly any politically correct topic under the Sun is acceptable as long as it doesn't have to do with trying to master meditation techniques. While there are sporadic moments of "dharma combat" or heated discussion for the purpose of learning and sharing the dharma, even these tend to be mostly on the philosophy of all of this.

The second odd phenomenon I have noticed has occurred in

situations when one might suspect that there would not be this problem.

I have been to a fair number of retreats in the West, and these tend to have small group meetings. The dharma teachers have invariably been giving instructions that emphasize following the motion of the breath or the sensations of the feet, developing concentration on these objects, not being lost in thought, and giving precise attention to bare reality just as it is. They tend to use the phrase "moment to moment" often, which in my book means, "Fast!" This is all as it should be.

They tend to mention things like impermanence, suffering, and no-self, and tend to advocate trying to understand these qualities of all experience directly without the elaboration of thought. They mention time and time again that one should not be lost in the stories and tape loops of the mind. They may have traveled thousands of miles at great expense to help people understand these teachings that they themselves may have spent many years learning. For the hundreds of dollars in retreat fees, donations, and spent vacation time, the students will perhaps get three meetings with the teacher during a 10-day retreat and Content and Ultimate Reality

perhaps get fifteen to twenty precious minutes of time to talk to a real meditation master, assuming they are lucky enough to actually be sitting with one.

However, when some eight to ten students finally get a chance to meet with the teacher in a small group meeting, a brief chance to really learn what this teacher has to teach, what happens? Do they talk about their whole-hearted attempts at following the careful and skillful instructions of the teacher? Strangely, this only seems to happen on rare occasions.

I was at one of these small group meetings where everyone was talking about their neurotic stuff. In a moment of feeling like I might

be able to actually add something useful, I said in a loud and exasperated voice, “The breath! Is anyone trying to notice the breath?” They just looked at me like I was out of my mind and went back to whining about their psychological crap. Here was a roomful of otherwise accomplished adults who somehow had been transformed into needy and pathetic children without any obvious ability to deal with their lives or follow very basic instructions. Beware of meditation cultures that consistently encourage this in people. It is a mark of something gone horribly wrong.

Stranger even than this, when students actually do talk about trying to follow the careful instructions of their meditation teachers, it can occasionally seem to be such a shock to teachers, such a violation of the unwritten taboos, and perhaps even such a threat to the hierarchy that they sometimes hardly seem to know how to handle it. In my more cynical moments, I have sometimes suspected that the quickest way to get worried looks from many modern Western meditation teachers is to talk about practice in a way that implies the attempt to actually master anything.

Most of the time students tend to whine about their relationships, their childhood, their neurotic thoughts, their screwed up lives, in short, content. I must say that I have great sympathy for these people. I really do. God knows we all have this sort of stuff to whine about; and, in the right context, whining about our stuff might be a very good idea. But two things are fairly clear: these people have spent too little time in therapy (or perhaps too much time in bad therapy), and somehow have not 98

Content and Ultimate Reality

heard one word of what the teacher has been talking about as regards insight practice.

Now, it is absolutely true that we all have our issues, pains, traumas, scars and quirks. We have to learn to deal with these somehow if we want to be happy and live the good life we all want to live. We have to find ways to deal with the content, to heal, to grow, to mature, and all of that, but we must also learn when to shift to seeing things on a completely different level. There is a time and a place for everything.

Imagine if you were an algebra teacher and you told your students to solve the homework in the back of chapter one. Instead, your students turn in long, rambling essays about the traumas of their childhood. How would you feel? Unfortunately, you would feel like many meditation teachers. Now, it is true that many dharma teachers have a great time helping people deal with their stuff, and some of these are even quite good at it. There are others that put up with having to play this role, but they would prefer to be teaching insight

practices. Some teachers just can't stand it when they spend lots of time giving careful instructions only to have very few people follow them, particularly when they know what an amazing opportunity for even deeper healing, increased wellbeing and clarity is being squandered by their students when they fail to really practice.

Sometimes people have actually heard just a bit of the teachings on impermanence, suffering and emptiness, but then proceed to talk about this in highly content-centered terms. They may say things like, "Oh, yes, I am impermanent and will die one day. This is awful and this thought causes me suffering. Truly, I feel empty inside."

This is macroscopic, about grand yet crude concepts and ideas, and so is still squarely in the territory of philosophy and existentialism. This meditator not only needs to learn what insight practice actually is, but might also benefit from a bit more sunshine and exercise or perhaps even some of those new anti-depressants. A very small amount of such reflection can be of some limited benefit if the energy of the frustration is directed into practice. There are other types of reflection that might be much more skillful, but those are largely a topic for another day (see Jack Kornfield's A Path with Heart or Christopher Titmuss' Light on Enlightenment).

If meditators would actually just go microscopic and try to see the Three Characteristics of each and every individual little sensation that makes up their experience, then they might begin to actually understand reality at the level that makes the difference. Effectively encouraging students to shift their attention from fixation on content and the macroscopic to also including the microscopic and universal is probably the hardest job of the meditation teacher. I sometimes wonder how many of them have largely given up trying to do this.

When meditators on retreat focus on content instead of grounding the mind in the objects of meditation (which just might produce the deep insights that will make the big difference that they are looking for), they basically let their minds go, and go they do. After a day or two of silence and a nearly complete lack of distractions, the spinning of their minds on neurotic content may have accelerated like the turbine of a jet engine on full throttle. If they were a mess before, now this has been multiplied by a factor of 10 to 100. They then hit the small group meeting like a runaway freight train of exacerbated mind noise, and all present get to be bathed in the profound lack of clarity that they have spent so much hard cushion time cultivating.

Years go by, and their practice deepens, not into insight territory, but into epoxy-like faith and further fixation on content. They learn how to "talk Buddhist." They learn the "culture" of Buddhism in just

the same way that they learned the culture of transpersonal therapy, transactional analysis or French existentialism. They become fascinated with their growing knowledge of Pali, their fancy brass bell from Nepal, or their knowledge of Tantric iconography. They have taken

Bodhisattva vows 108 times.

They may become neurotic about “right speech” and self-righteous about “Noble Silence.” They may begin to adopt the gently

condescending and overly deliberate speech patterns and mannerisms that quietly scream, “I am sooooo spiritual and aware!” They may become fixated on complex, arbitrary, restrictive and even

disempowering models of what is “proper Buddhist behavior,” trying to be a “good Buddhist,” whatever that is. In short, they become very religious. At worst, they become gaudy and distorted caricatures of the spiritual life. Such people are generally very tiring to be around.

They may even get sucked into the all too common trap of praying for a “better rebirth” and “making merit” rather than actually trying to master the art of meditation and wise living here and now. In short, the trappings, dogma and scene become everything, and penetrating the illusions that bind them on the wheel of suffering is lost in the shuffle.

At its worst, they can go on like this for enough time so that they develop quite a retreat resume but little or no insight, and then get caught by this. They have been to India, sat with this teacher and that teacher, had Tantric initiations, or been sitting for twenty years. They begin to become fascinated by all of this and somehow they begin to feel

“wise” despite the fact that they may have no insight whatsoever into the universal truth of things because they never actually learned insight practice. They use the word “emptiness” in casual conversation when they don’t have Clue One what it means. But they feel they do, as they have spent so much time hearing it, “meditating” on it, and being spiritual. They talk about “letting go” and “mindfulness” as if they are the experts.

They may even begin to teach, and to do so they find themselves having to subtly or overtly rationalize that they completely understand what they are teaching. After all, they want to encourage faith in their beautiful tradition, and so try to appear clear and unconfused. They get stuck here, stuck in the muck of their rationalizations, the misapplied lingo, the sugarcoated dogma, the role of teacher, and the cultural trappings that they have become experts

in. From this point it can become nearly impossible for them to actually learn anything, as they are now trapped in the very teachings that were originally designed to free them from just such a situation.

101

15.WHAT WENT WRONG? *

How did this happen? How did they substitute knowledge of

culture, content and dogma for fundamental insight? A large number of such people are quite intelligent. Many have successful careers or graduate degrees. Most of the big name teachers they sat with probably had some insight and may have been highly enlightened. So what happened? I can only speculate, but perhaps something good will come of such speculation.

It could just be that they are into spiritual scenes, trappings, and the like. That is what they went looking for, and they found it in dizzying abundance. It could be that they had no idea what they were getting into or what they wanted, and so they ended up becoming fascinated with these things simply out of cultural inertia, as many around them will likely have done so.

An old friend and former meditation teacher of mine and I were ranting in our typically passionate style about this very topic one day, and we came up with the “Mushroom Theory.” Mushrooms are fed manure and kept in the dark, and we speculated that part of the problem was that some meditation teachers were using the “mushroom method” of teaching, thus raising a crop of “mushroom meditators,” all soft and pale. This is actually a bit of an extreme way to describe the situation, and is not meant to imply that the teachers were being malicious. However, there is this cultural factor in Western Buddhism that real insight, insight into the fundamental nature of reality or the Three Characteristics, is almost never talked about directly, unlike in Burma or some other settings. My friend and I called this cultural factor the “Mushroom Factor.”

Thus, most teachers won’t say something as blatant as, “Well, when I was meditating, I spent some period of time lost in the stories and tape loops of my mind. This was terrible and I got nowhere but nutty.

However, one day a senior teacher straightened me out and somehow convinced me to ground my mind in the specific sensations that make up the objects of meditation and examine impermanence. After some days of consistent and diligent practice using good technique, I began to directly penetrate the three illusions of permanence, satisfactoriness and self, and my world began to be broken down into the mind moments

What Went Wrong?

and vibrations that I always thought were just talk. By paying

careful attention to bare phenomena arising and passing quick moment after quick moment, I progressively moved through the stages of insight and got my first taste of enlightenment. Thus, if you spin in content and don't penetrate the three illusions, you are wasting your time and mine.

This is just the way it is. If you develop strong concentration on the primary object and investigate the Three Characteristics consistently, this will almost certainly produce insight. This is just the way it is. Any questions?"

Most meditation teachers won't say this, and there are some reasons why. First, they may not wish to alienate their student base. One reason for this may come from the teacher hoping that if students are led into this gently and with great tolerance for their gross misinterpretations of the practice and teachings then they may be able to persevere. Another possible reason may have to do with the fact that making a living as a dharma teacher can be tough, and more students means more

donations. In short, the reality of what practice really is and entails doesn't tend to sell well despite the potential for extraordinary benefits, as students tend to like their delusions and fascinations more than they realize.

Teachers may also want to hold back the details of what real insight is like so that they can more accurately evaluate students' practice without having to worry about students rationalizing that they are experiencing whatever it is the teacher is talking about. Disclosure of the details of what insight is actually like can result in students giving spurious reports in interviews either out of their own confusion or a genuine desire to fool the teacher and make themselves look good.

These situations definitely happen, but probably not nearly as often as people completely missing the boat on what is insight practice and what is just wallowing in the muck of their mind and perhaps becoming even more neurotic about it. Thus, my friend and I decided that we would talk about insight, our practice, and this sort of thing when we taught. It turns out that doing this is harder than it would seem. Some hints about why we generally failed to completely live up to our own ideals will be given later in the chapter called More on the "Mushroom

Factor". However, we have both done our best to fight the trend and talk about the stages of insight and what is possible on the spiritual path.

Another possible reason why people don't learn to actually

practice correctly is that many people are not on retreat or in the meditation class to learn what the teachers have to teach. This may be for a variety of reasons. Perhaps they are just there to find something else, such as time away from some situation, but are not there to find what the teachers are teaching. Some students may have so much invested in their level of education and high position that they just can't hear what the teachers are talking about, or they hear it and think, "Oh, yes, I myself have read many books and fully understand that trivial little point about impermanence, but when do we get to enlightenment?" Yikes!

Some students may be there to further their psychotherapy, which can be a fine and worthy goal. However, they may assume that the meditation teacher is probably the best psychotherapist they could have.

They may think, "After all, they are enlightened, aren't they? They must be completely sane and balanced. They must know about how to have the perfect relationship, how to find the prefect job, how to invest in the stock market, how to talk to their mother, how to end world hunger, how to rebuild a carburetor, and all other such details of wise living on this Earth. After all, isn't enlightenment about understanding everything?" Gadzooks!

A quick digression here: enlightenment is about understanding the fundamental nature of all things, and what they happen to be is ultimately completely and utterly irrelevant to enlightenment. Thus, very enlightened beings understand something fundamental about whatever arises or however their lives manifest, i.e. its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and emptiness, as well as all of the stuff about the True Self, which is the same thing and will be discussed later. However, they have no more knowledge about the specifics of the world, i.e.

content or subject matter, than they have acquired in just the way that anyone else acquires knowledge about the specifics of this world. They can even have all sorts of psychological baggage to deal with, and this is probably the norm.

Enlightened beings will know a lot about the territory of insight, having had to navigate it to get enlightened, but this is a strangely

specialized skill and a fairly esoteric body of knowledge that is only really useful in helping others navigate it. True, being enlightened does provide by degrees deeper levels of extreme clarity into the workings of the mind, and this can be helpful. By understanding their own mind, they will have some level of insight into the basics of the minds of others.

However, unless the meditation teacher is a trained psychotherapist, they are not a psychotherapist and probably shouldn't pretend to be one, though this unfortunately happens far too often in my humble opinion. Just so, a trained psychotherapist is not enlightened unless they get enlightened and shouldn't pretend to understand insight practice if they don't. This also happens far too often if you ask me, and the dark irony is that they tend to charge much more than real, qualified dharma teachers. (Note: the Buddha was quite adamant about no one charging for the teachings, which are considered priceless. This system of non-obligatory donation and mutual support has worked quite well for 2,500

years, and it would be a tragic mistake to assume that it cannot function in the West.)

Using retreats or meditation purely as a form of continuing

psychotherapy may have other problems associated with it. One may not be in the guidance of a trained therapist and may not be used to the mind noise amplification factor that silence and a lack of distractions tend to create in an absence of grounding the mind in a meditation object. Further, one may not gain the benefits of the only thing that does make a permanent difference in ending fundamental suffering and bringing the quiet joy of understanding: mastering insight practice and getting enlightened.

Another quick digression here: there is this odd idea that somehow a lack of effort is a good thing, or that it is bad to want to get enlightened. This is completely absurd and has paralyzed the practice of far too many. I believe this has come from an extremely confused misunderstanding of Zen or the Bodhisattva Vow. No one ever got enlightened without effort. This never happened and never will happen.

Anyone who has really gotten into Zen or Mahayana teachings will know firsthand that they both require a tremendous amount of effort just like every other spiritual path. As one of my teacher's teachers put 105

it, "In the end, you must give up even the desire for enlightenment, but not too soon!" Sutta #131 in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha is called "One Fortunate Attachment," and in it the Buddha clearly states that making effort to realize the truth of your experience is an extremely good idea. He also goes on and on about the Three Characteristics; funny that.

Another reason that students often fail to make progress is that they confuse content and insight. I suspect that they are confused because they have spent their whole lives thinking about content, learning about content, and dealing with content in a context where

content matters, i.e. when one is not doing insight practice. You can't take a spelling test in first grade and say that all that is important is that words come and go, don't satisfy and aren't you. This just won't fly and wouldn't be appropriate. Just so, when practicing morality, the first and most fundamental training in spirituality, content is everything, or at least as far as training in morality can take you. You can't be a mass murderer and rationalize this by thinking, "Well, they were all impermanent, unsatisfactory and empty, so why not kill 'em?" This just won't fly either, and so content and spirituality get quite connected. This is good to a point: see the chapter called Right Thought and The Aegean

Stables.

Fixation on content even works well when practicing the second training, training in concentration. When meditation students are learning to concentrate, they are told to concentrate on specific things, like the breath, a Green Tara (a tantric "deity"), or some other such thing. This is content. There is no such thing as the breath or a Green Tara from the point of view of insight practices, as these are just fresh streams of impermanent and absolutely transitory sensations that are crudely labeled "breath" or "Green Tara." But for the purpose of developing the second training, concentration, this is ignored and these impermanent sensations are crudely labeled "breath" or "Green Tara."

Thus, even for pure concentration practice, what you are concentrating on, i.e. content, matters. Thus, the idea that content is everything is reinforced.

However, when it comes to insight practice, content will get you nowhere fast. In insight practice, everything the student has learned

about being lost in the names of things and thoughts about them, i.e.

content, will be completely useless and an impediment. Here the inquiry must turn to impermanence, suffering and no-self. These characteristics must be understood clearly and directly in whatever sensations arise, be they beautiful, ugly, helpful, not helpful, skillful, not skillful, holy, profane, dull, or otherwise. Anything other than this is just not insight practice, never was and never will be.

It doesn't matter what the quality of your mind is, or what the sensations of your body are, if you directly understand the momentary sensations that make these up to be impermanent, unsatisfactory and not self, then you are on the right path, the path of liberating insight.

However, as mentioned before, off the cushion the quality of your mind, your reactions, your words and deeds all matter. These are not

in conflict. Insight practice is about ultimate reality, the ultimate nature of reality, and thus the specifics don't matter. Morality and concentration are about relative reality, and thus the specifics are everything. Learning to be a master of both the ultimate and the relative is what this is all about.

Another reason that people don't make progress is that they may be being taught by people who have no or little insight, and so are taught by those who are themselves fascinated by content and unskilled in going beyond this into insight practices. The scary truth is that there are far more people teaching insight meditation that don't know what insight is than those that do, though this tends to be less true in big, established retreat centers. Thus, even if the students learn what they are taught, if those who do not know are teaching them, then what they learn is unlikely to be correct or helpful. While the teacher may have learned to parrot the language of ultimate reality, this is absolutely no substitute for direct knowledge of it. In the tradition I come from, they consider the second stage of enlightenment (Second Path, see Part III) to generally be the minimum level of understanding for a teacher. This is a very reasonable standard.

Another possible reason that people get lost and don't follow the clear and basic instructions of insight practices is that they just can't believe that doing something as completely simple as looking into the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and emptiness of the mundane 107

What Went Wrong?

sensations that make up their ordinary world could produce awakening.

It just sounds ridiculous to them, and thus they imagine that there are secret teachings somewhere that are the real way to enlightenment.

Thus, they may not try at all, may practice in their "own way," or may keep trying to read more into the teachings than is there and come up with their own special nonsense. These unhelpful ways of speculating can become very engaging, but they won't produce insight. These speculations can also lead to people trying to do very advanced practices that were originally designed for meditators that had already mastered concentration and insight practices to a pronounced degree (such as intensive Tantric retreats), and thus not deriving the full benefit from them or running into other problems.

How do I know that solely content-based practice won't produce insight? Because there are only Three Doors to ultimate reality, that's why, and they are utterly unrelated to content, though they can be found in all content if the content aspect is ignored. (Actually, there is sort of a fourth door that is accessible to very realized beings, see the

Appendix.)

“Only Three Doors? But there are thousands of practices, many traditions! How can you say there are only Three Doors?”

There are only Three Doors, that’s how. I don’t care what tradition you subscribe to, what practice you do, or who you are, there are only three basic ways to enter into the attainment of ultimate reality, emptiness, Nirvana, or whatever you want to call it. These doors relate directly to profound and direct understandings of the Three

Characteristics of impermanence, suffering and no-self, and you have to understand the heck out of these to enter into the ranks of the Noble Ones.

“But there are many valid traditions that do not talk about the Three Characteristics!” It may appear so, but if the tradition is a valid tradition you will find these teachings in there somehow, in some other language or formulation, as these are the only way. You will find them in the works of Rumi, Kabir and Krishnamurti. You will find them in the Bible and Koran. You will find them in the writings of St. John of the Cross and many other Christian mystics. You will find them in all of the branches of Buddhism. You will find them in the Upanishads. You will find them in the writings of Carlos Castaneda. You will find them 108

What Went Wrong?

wherever you find a true spiritual path, and that is just all there is to it. It can help to consider that to completely understand compassion is to understand suffering and vice versa, as these are really two sides of the same coin. Also, to understand True Self practices is the same as understanding no-self practices, as these are also two sides of the same coin.

“But we are tantric practitioners, and the Three Characteristics are merely a low-brow Hinayana teaching.” Tantra primarily cultivates the emptiness door, that of no-self, which is one of the Three

Characteristics. It can also be useful for transmuting energy into more skillful forms, a bit of which will be discussed later. However, those who consider themselves to be mahayanists or vajrayanaists should read the fine print. You will find that all Three Characteristics are there, and in fact that you are highly encouraged to master the “Hinayana” practices before moving on to the Mahayana or Vajrayana practices anyway. I strongly suggest checking out Lama Yeshe’s Introduction to Tantra.

Further, the Hinayana is often confused with the Theravada, and while there are similarities, the Theravada is much more extensive than the Tibetan division of the Hinayana and contains extensive

teachings on compassion and emptiness as well as helping others, but this is a topic for another time.

In short, should you enter ultimate reality or emptiness, it will be through one of the Three Doors. This is just the way it is. It is not negotiable. The nature of the mind and reality are just the nature of the mind and reality. You cannot change this, but you can understand it.

"But we are Zen students. We realize Buddha Nature! We don't need the Three Characteristics, as we sit zazen!" Read any good book on Zen, such as those by Dogen, Chi-nul, or the excellent Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, by Shunryu Suzuki. The Three Characteristics are in there in abundance, and those who think they can enter ultimate reality in some other way are fooling themselves. Paying direct attention to bare reality with clarity and precision will result in directly observing the Three Characteristics regardless of whether or not you wish to call them that, as they are absolutely the truth of all conditioned things in all times and in all beings.

Thus, the practice, tradition, and all of that, i.e. content, are irrelevant in the end. However, you need them right up until the last moment, so don't think that I am advocating not following a tradition. I am just advocating actually following the tradition correctly and thus clearly penetrating into the nature of your actual experience just as it is.

Nothing helps in the end but understanding the fundamental nature of reality, i.e. the Three Characteristics.

It may often be true that people simply are not in a position where insight practices are appropriate for them. Insight practices are not for everyone. One of the clear marks of whether or not they are

appropriate for someone is their ability to even do them in the first place. If despite clear instructions and appropriate support a would-be insight meditator is simply unable to do anything but spin in content and fixation, they should try something else until such time as they can hear, understand and then follow the extremely basic but specific instructions of insight practices.

The last and perhaps most pernicious of the reasons that students don't really apply themselves is that they don't actually believe it can be done, that they could actually get enlightened or that anyone else except a rare few get enlightened. Further, if they do know of an potentially enlightened person, such as a lineaged teacher, that person typically becomes thought of as being "other," an aberration, one of "those over there," one of the chosen ones, and somehow surreal, like an imagined demi-god.

This has been a terrible problem since the very beginning of all mystical traditions, and is unfortunately unlikely to go away any time soon. Part of this is due to the “Mushroom Factor,” but there are many other complex reasons for it. Suffice to say, it can be done and is done today by students using these simple practices. Find someone enlightened who is willing to talk more about this if you want specific examples, and see the chapter called More on the “Mushroom Factor.”

16.A CLEAR GOAL

Many of the possible reasons for why people can get so into

“Buddhism” in every way except clear, well-defined, focused and precise practice are directly related to a lack of a clear goal. If you have no clear idea of what you want or why you are doing something, then the results are likely to be just as murky, vague, and fragmented. Why are you doing all of this? This is a very important question.

People may wish to go on a retreat and have the whole thing be relaxing and blissful. This can actually be attained temporarily if they then gain some mastery of concentration practices, though their clarity will almost certainly shatter the instant they leave the retreat, as concentration practices produce no long-term stability on their own.

However, they may think that they wish to get enlightened by doing insight practices. Insight practices involve hard work and clear, non-anesthetized examination of suffering, among other things. Thus, these two goals of maintaining bliss and developing insight simultaneously are in direct conflict, and the student’s practice will surely be conflicted.

This is just one of many possible examples.

Having a clear goal is absolutely fundamental to the practice in more ways than may be initially obvious. In fact, if you understood your actual reality right now clearly enough to get to the root of why you were doing all of this and where all this motion of mind comes from, you would be highly realized. You would penetrate to the heart of compassion and suffering, of ignorance and emptiness, and be finally free.

I do not write this lightly. It is completely vital that your motivation be as clearly understood as possible as it actually is and that all of its energy be channeled into realizing you goals. Wishy-washy practice brings wishy-washy results, and determined, well-guided, brave, and wholehearted practice may bring the desired results.

Knowing what is possible helps, i.e. what each of the trainings can and cannot accomplish. I will spell out the details of such things in Part III. The specifics of our goal may change with time as we

become more familiar with the realities of these, but the core motivation for all of this never changes. That is quite a statement, given that all things are impermanent, and about as big a hint as can be given. Whatever

A Clear Goal

ultimate truth you want on the spiritual path is to be found in the sensations of the wanting itself.

Thus, don't look out there except to find wise guidance about how to look inward, for what you are looking for is "nearer than near." It is in the looking. It is in the motivation. It is in the suffering, which is why this was the First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught. He went right for the heart of the thing. It is in the question itself, which is why koan training can work. The experience of the question contains the answer to the content of the question. It is in the undying love that drives our every wish for happiness.

Strangely, the process of creating the illusory sense of a self arises out of compassion, but confused compassion, which is desire. This may sound odd, but it is as if there was an eddy in reality that befuddled empty and compassionate awareness, which is not a thing nor separate from things. Thus, somehow it seems that there is something to defend, some separate self that must be protected. Thus, out of confused compassion, barriers and defense mechanisms continue to be erected to defend this territory, this illusion of a separate self. Spiritual practices are designed to systematically debunk this illusion and penetrate these barriers by providing clarity, whereas all of the traditions can easily become part of these barriers, cultures to defend, knowledge to assume is self or owned by self, and that sort of thing.

It is as if reality got caught in an unfortunate loop, and this is what we have to work with, as this loop of illusory duality thinks it is us. The natural tendency, given "our" lack of clarity, is to continue to defend this

"self" out of compassion and a lack of understanding that there never was such a thing. This defense and identification is the process of ego.

Interestingly enough, all of the phenomena that make up this process, i.e. all of the "defilements," are themselves empty, intrinsically luminous and non-dual, though they seem otherwise by their own contrivance.

Teachings such as "you are already enlightened, but you have yet to realize it" point to this (see Moon in a Dewdrop, The Writings of Zen Master Dogen, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, for a particularly profound discussion of the uses of this dangerous point of view). Thus, realization is not something created but instead is discovered as being

an intrinsic aspect of phenomena.

Thus, with enough stability and clarity (concentration and wisdom), this natural, compassionate process of manifestation can begin to function more skillfully, as it has better information to go on, and can begin to see that creating the illusion of a separate, permanent self was not at all helpful (though it seemed to be). At this point, “it” will then let go of the illusion it has been perpetuating and return to understanding its natural state, which is freedom and non-duality.

This is something that absolutely cannot be accomplished by an act of will. It only arises when the level of clarity is high enough and the heart accepting enough of things as they are. One might say that Grace favors the well-trained mind. The pronounced tenaciousness of this process of defending an illusory and arbitrary “self” demonstrates clearly just how much compassion and how much confusion there is in this. Work to see clearly so that the knot may begin to untie itself.

I include all of this in the section called “A Clear Goal” because the very sense of a drive to find something is actually the thing it is seeking.

The motivation is looking for itself. In those sensations themselves is something very powerful and amazing. However, in order to see this, a shift has to happen in which the drive becomes driven to understand the sensations of that drive itself rather than looking to future sensations for satisfaction. This is a completely unintuitive thing to do, and this is one reason why meditation practices can seem so awkward sometimes.

However, the fact that the drive or the goal contains its own solution is the reason why there is such relentless emphasis on being present to what is happening now. If we can get this drive to just chill on its future fixation and simply understand itself, insight is close at hand.

If you feel frustrated that your practice has not been as energized or as clear as you wish it to be, first sit with the fullness of that wish, with the fullness of that frustration, with the fullness of your fears, with the fullness of your hopes, with the fullness of that suffering and compassion, as clearly and bravely as you possibly can until you understand them to their very depths as they actually are. Channel all of this energy into clear, precise, kind and focused living and practice.

Since this whole book is clearly goal-oriented, I thought that it would be appropriate to add a few guidelines about formulating specific goals and working towards mastery that can help reduce the problems that 113

poorly conceived goals can cause. Goals tend to involve a heavy future component. The trick is to add a component that relates to the Here and Now as well.

For instance, one could wish to become enlightened. This is a purely future-oriented goal. One could also wish to understand the true nature of the sensations that make up one's world so clearly that one becomes enlightened. This adds a present component and thus makes the whole thing much more reasonable and workable. One could simply wish to deeply understand the true nature of the sensations that make up one's world as they arise in that practice session or during that day. This is a very immediate and present-oriented goal, and a very fine one indeed. It is also method-oriented rather than result-oriented. This is the mark of a good goal.

Similarly, one could try to be kind, honest or generous that day, try to appreciate interdependence that day, or try to stay really concentrated on some object for that practice session. These present and method-oriented goals are the foundation upon which great practice is based.

Purely future-oriented goals are at best mostly worthless and at worst very dangerous.

Wishing to become enlightened or more enlightened is only helpful if it helps one live in the present as it is. The same goes for training in morality and concentration, as articulated in Part I. A good friend of mine once forgot these basic rules of goal-oriented practice and strived with great energy for months to attain a goal that had nothing to do with the reality that he was experiencing at that time. The results were disastrous and the dark consequences of his error ring on to this day.

Don't get burned by the shadow side of goal-oriented practice. Avoid competition and comparing your practice to others. Stay present-oriented whenever possible, and always avoid purely future-oriented or results-oriented goals! Also, be careful what you ask for. You just might get it but with a price you could never have imagined.

It should be noted that thoughts of the past and future occur now.

These sensations are worthy of investigation. "Future mind" is only a problem if the sensations that make it up are not understood as they are. A fun practice to try is consciously thinking thoughts whose content is past- or future-oriented and noticing that they occur now. There is 114

something particularly profound about this that might be missed on first inspection.

While I am on the subject of goal-oriented practice, I should say a

few words about how to avoid overdoing it. First, if those around you, particularly those with a lot of experience in meditation and the spiritual life, are telling you that you should chill out a bit, they are probably saying it for good reason. Ask them why they think that and take their opinions into consideration. Now, it is true that sometimes people will tell you to chill out on your practice a bit just because of their own envy of your determination and diligence, but I haven't found this to be a common occurrence.

When on intensive retreats, there are a few basic ways to sail a bit too far out there too fast. The first is to stop eating. It is true that there is a long and glorious tradition of people fasting when doing spiritual practice, but generally they do so because they want to bring on severely altered states of consciousness. Fasting when meditating is an effective technique for doing this. Should you be doing insight practices, altered states are not your intended focus, and so these are more likely to be distracting than helpful. Further, severely altered states of consciousness can sometimes be very disruptive and hard to process, leading to what might be considered by some to be temporary insanity. If you are the sort of person who would drop LSD when out in public, then the altered states that fasting might bring on would probably not be a problem for you. On the other hand, if you are on retreat with other people, consideration for the fact that they may not want to deal with the potential side effects of your vision-quest is warranted.

Another way to go way out on the edge is to stop sleeping. Sleep deprivation can eventually lead to very altered states of consciousness and visionary experiences. The exact same considerations that come into play with not eating apply. While it may be true that when doing intensive practice the need for sleep may go down to perhaps 4-6 hours or sometimes less, try to get at least some sleep every night.

There are those that are such macho meditators that they will try to sit for very long periods of time, say 10 to 24 hours. While this might seem like a really brave thing to do, a real tribute to one's determination, I don't see the point. I have managed to make very rapid 115

A Clear Goal

progress when on intensive retreats where the longest sit I did was 4

hours and most were less than 1.5 hours. However, if one sits long enough and really pushes the investigation with heroic effort, one can get into states of consciousness that are quite volatile. It can be very difficult to ground back down and integrate what comes out of that sort of extreme practice. Again, out of consideration for your mind and body, as well as for those around you on retreat who may

not want to deal with your potential inability to integrate and control the energy that can be generated from that sort of practice, consider moderation in sitting.

Lastly, there are some who will try to mix mind-altering substances and meditation. This can seem like an easy and fast path. In fact, there are countless traditions that use these as an integral part of their path.

However, there are numerous strong warnings against doing this at all or against doing this without the guidance of those that really know what they are doing and when not in the proper setting (e.g. far out in the desert with no one around except a friend to keep you safe and no big cliffs or weapons nearby). I have found that simply doing really consistent insight or concentration practices well can quickly produce altered states and strange experiences that have taken me to the very brink of what I could handle skillfully and sometimes beyond, many of which I will discuss in Part III, so I don't see the need for using mind altering substances. Further, there are reasons to learn to see things from different points of view on our own power so that these things may become a part of who and what we are rather than some transient side effect brought on by tinkering with our neurochemistry.

In short, those on the path of heroic effort can easily get side tracked into ritualistic displays that seem like heroic effort, but they are not. Heroic effort on the insight path means heroic investigation of the Three Characteristics of the sensations that make up our experience, whatever they may be. Thus, my advice when on an insight meditation retreat is to really power the investigation all day long, whether you are sitting, walking, reclining, standing, eating, washing, etc. Get enough sleep. Eat well to keep up your health. Take care of your body, particularly your knees and back.

Should those with more experience than you in these matters consistently tell you to back off on the effort just a bit, give it a try. I have occasionally done otherwise and regretted it. William Blake wrote that we do not know what is enough unless we know what is more than enough. Unfortunately, most insight meditators will not put forth enough effort to know either. However, should you find that you are simply cooking yourself through too much effort, learn from your mistakes and follow the middle path.

The last point about having a clear goal I make reluctantly, as I am afraid that I will justify the very thing I wish to speak out against. Here goes…

I heard someone speculating that Zen might have developed as

being very austere and drab because of how colorful and unstable Japan was during its development, and likewise the Tibetan tradition was very colorful and complex because Tibet was so bleak. Burmese Buddhism might be so extremely technical, goal-oriented, efficient and effective because their country is such a chaotic mess. Perhaps in just this way, we have the most goal-oriented culture in the world and yet tend towards the least goal-oriented, least practical and least effective take on Buddhism I have found anywhere.

It is an unfortunate shadow side of our culture that many of us can barely tolerate one more goal to attain, one more hoop to jump through, one more exam to pass, one more certification or degree to obtain, one more SUV to buy. Perhaps we are crafting a Buddhism in which you don't have to really ever accomplish anything so as to find a refuge from our extremely neurotic fixation on achievement. This might explain why we often fixate on teachings such as "Effortless effort",

"There is nothing to attain," and postponing enlightenment through the Bodhisattva Vow. Believe me, as someone who has two graduate degrees and actively involved in a field that requires constant reading, recertification, and training, I am often sick of the whole achievement trip as well.

On the other hand, I have found that goal-oriented practice

combined with good instruction and a few good conceptual frameworks is largely unstoppable barring extreme circumstances. Thus, if you are sick of goals to the point that you can't make any room for those that 117

A Clear Goal

will soon follow, strip down your daily life down so as to make room for the drive to master the states and stages of the path. Take more vacations, back off on the career-ladder climbing a little, and make time to really bust out some serious meditative accomplishments. The Buddha was known for saying that there was nothing so valuable in this world as mastering the dharma. I couldn't agree more.

118

17.HARNESSING THE ENERGY OF THE "DEFILEMENTS"

I am astounded at how many people are completely paralyzed in their practice because they feel bad about so many of the types of emotional sensations that arise. Unrealistic ideals of the emotional perfection that meditation might bring often create an inability to face one's actual humanity or to continue practicing. The energy in

"undesirable" emotions can actually be used to fuel one's practice, which is good, as this is much of what we have to work with.

This paralysis happens because people tend to feel that "bad"

emotions should not arise and are worthless and embarrassing. While there is a lot to be said for repressing the “defilements,” there is also a lot to be said for using their tremendous energy in ways that are skillful.

Basically, until we are very enlightened, some odd mixture of compassion and confusion motivates everything we do, as mentioned elsewhere, and so we have to learn to work with this. Further, these potentially useful emotional energies will continue to arise like the weather, even in very enlightened beings (contrary to popular belief), so we must learn how to deal with them and use them well.

Remember that these practices and teachings are not about

becoming some kind of emotionally devoid, non-existent entity, but about clearly understanding the truth of our humanity and life.

Becoming fluent in the true nature of all categories of sensations, including the sensations that make up all categories of emotions, is a particularly good idea and highly recommended. This might even be undertaken as a systematic practice by those who are dedicated to thorough understanding. Thus, those doing noting practice, which I highly recommend, can note which emotions they are feeling, such as fear, boredom, anger, confidence, restlessness, joy, jealousy, etc.

Further, if the powerful energy of the emotional life can be harnessed to energize our practice, this can be extremely helpful. Some level of skill and moderation is required here, a middle way between defilement restraint and energy transmutation. Either extreme can be harmful or helpful depending on how much wisdom the student has, how good their teachers are, and how well the student listens to their teachers.

Harnessing the Energy of the “Defilements”

It should be noted that those who are passionate about practice and learning to actually practice correctly are much more likely to make progress than those who are not. Those who are able to channel all their rage, frustration, lust, greed, despair, confusion and anguish into trying to find a better way are the only ones who are likely to have what it takes to finally attain freedom. Those who are actually able to sit with the specific sensations that make up rage, lust, anger, confusion and all the rest with clarity, precision, acceptance of their humanity, and equanimity are even more likely to get enlightened. This paragraph deserves to be read more than once.

It is common for be people to feel bad about their lack of progress.

This can cause them to feel extremely frustrated, and produce all sorts of self-judgment, jealousy, extremes of blind faith, and rigid adherence to dogma. It can paralyze a student’s practice if they get caught in these or in thinking that desire for enlightenment is a

problem when in fact it is the most compassionate wish that someone could have for themselves or others. The whole trick is to channel this energy into actual practice using good technique rather than comparison or thoughts about progress. Simply examine the sensations that make up all of this frustration and comparison, i.e. don't stop investigating when certain categories of sensations arise.

Try this little exercise the next time some kind of strong and seemingly useless or unskillful emotion arises. First, stabilize precisely on the sensations that make it up and perhaps even allow these to become stronger if this helps you to examine them more clearly. Find where these are in the body, and see as clearly as possible what sorts of images and story lines are associated with these physical sensations. Be absolutely clear about the full magnitude of the suffering in these, how long each lasts, that these sensations are observed and not particularly in one's control.

Now, find the compassion in it. Take a minute or two (no more) to reflect on why this particular pattern of sensations seems to be of some use even though it may not seem completely useful in its current form.

Is there a wish for yourself or others to be happy in these sensations? Is there a wish for the world to be a better place? Is there a wish for someone to understand something important? Is there a wish for things 120

Harnessing the Energy of the "Defilements"

to be better than they are? Is there a wish to find pleasure, tranquility, or the end of suffering? Sit with these questions, with the sensations that make them up, allowing them to be strong enough for to see what is going on but not so strong that you become completely overwhelmed by them.

Notice that fear has in it the desire to protect us or those about whom we care. Anger wants the world to be happy and work well or for justice to be done. Frustration comes from the caring sensations of anger being thwarted. Desire is rooted in the wish to be happy.

Judgment comes from the wish for things to conform to high standards.

Sadness comes from the sense of how good things could be. I could go on like this for a whole book.

Actively reflecting along these lines, sit with this compassionate wish, acknowledge it, and feel the compassionate aspect of it. Allow the actual sensations that seem to be fundamental to wanting to be directly understood as and where they are. Remember that this same quality of compassion is in all beings, in all their unskillful and confused attempts to find happiness and the end of suffering. Sit for a bit with this reflection as it relates directly to your experience.

Then, examine the mental sensations related to the object that you either wish for (attraction), wish to get away from (aversion), or wish would just be able to be ignored (ignorance). Examine realistically if this will fundamentally help yourself and others and if these changes are within your power to bring about. If so, then plan and act with as much compassion and kindness as possible.

Remember then that all the rest of the suffering of that emotional pattern is created by your mind and its confusion, and vow to channel its force into developing morality, concentration, and wisdom.

Reflection on the fact that the emotions have unskillful components as well as skillful ones can give us a more realistic relationship to our hearts, minds and bodies, and allow us to grow in wisdom and kindness without blindly shutting ourselves down or chaining ourselves to a wall.

From a certain point of view, we are all doing our best all the time, and the problem is just that we do not see clearly enough.

There is a Tibetan teaching from Tantra called “The Five Buddha Families” or “Five Sky Dancers” that does a good job of dealing with the 121

Harnessing the Energy of the “Defilements”

wide world of emotions and their helpful and less than helpful aspects.

There is also a Tibetan teaching called “The Six Realms” that can help as well. Both of these teachings are too rich and deep to do them justice here. If you are interested in these fine teachings, you might check out Journey Without Goal, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism and Transcending Madness, all by Chogyam Trungpa.

It should be noted that the fundamental rule when applying

emotion-derived effort in practice is to actually put it into practice rather than thoughts about practice, thoughts about some goal that seems far off, thoughts about success or failure, thoughts about one’s strengths or weaknesses, or even thoughts about putting effort into practice. These traps are all too common, blindly waste the vast power inherent in our emotional life, and cause rather than reduce difficulties. Some of us will have to learn the hard way.

I remember some time ago I when I realized that something I

thought that I had understood quite thoroughly was actually only partially understood. I was very much less than happy with this, and decided to put the fullness of this compassionate rage into relentless, focused investigation of the Three Characteristics during whatever periods of time I could find during my day for doing so. It was only two months later that I came to understand what I wished to, and I was grateful for the power of the emotional life and what it can lend to practice. Remember, there is love and wisdom mixed into even our

"worst" emotions. If that is what we have to work with, let's use it wisely!

Some may then say, "That is not right motivation! You cannot proceed without right motivation!" Well, aside from the fact that this simply isn't true, such people trap themselves in a Catch 22. To attain this "very pure" motivation, to use dangerous language, one must understand what it is that one wants to use this "pure motivation" to understand. Thus, were we unable to proceed based upon our

somewhat deluded motivations, awakening would be impossible by definition.

Luckily, awakening is possible, and the only tool we have is practice based upon semi-deluded motivations. I am extremely grateful that this seems to be sufficient if we are willing to use what we have rather than fantasizing about some perfect us that doesn't exist. Without greed, 122

Harnessing the Energy of the "Defilements"

rage, grandiosity, frustration, insecurity, fear and a host of other semi-deluded forces, we would hardly budge. We wouldn't pick up dharma books, we wouldn't go on retreats, we wouldn't deal with our stuff, and we wouldn't care at all. But we do care, and so we forge on. Thank the Metaphorical God for the power of our emotions and the pain the dark ones cause. They are the gasoline that drives us on the road to understanding.

123

18.RIGHT THOUGHT AND THE AEGEAN STABLES

There is a lot of emphasis on "right thought" and suppressing the mental "defilements" in Buddhism, as well as training in morality, "right speech" and that sort of thing. As these are agendas for what happens in our ordinary reality, they are aspects of training in morality. This emphasis on controlling our thoughts can be helpful but it has it limits and often causes problems when misunderstood. When this becomes the predominant thrust of one's practice and involves images of self-perfection that deny the basic realities of human existence and the inevitable dark sides of life, trouble is basically guaranteed.

The Buddha did go on and on about restraining thought,

transforming thought, and that sort of thing. He was making a very important point, but he didn't stop there. He also advocated that people go on to cultivate concentration and then insight, so as to temporarily quiet and then overcome forever the fundamental delusions that drive our noisy minds. This same point would apply to psychotherapy: it can be useful, but to find the end of suffering we must go much deeper.

Sutra #20 in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (great

book, by the way) is called “The Removal of Distracting Thoughts.” In it, Buddha admonished his followers to deal with unskillful, evil, unwholesome or useless thoughts in the following ways. First, if the student is paying attention to something that is causing these unskillful thoughts, then they should pay attention to something wholesome that does not produce unskillful thoughts. If this fails, then they should reflect on the danger in those thoughts and thus try to condition themselves to not think such thoughts in this way. If this fails, then they should try to forget those thoughts and not give any attention to them. If this fails, then they should give attention to quieting the mind and to stilling these thoughts. If this fails, then the student should bear down with their full will and “crush mind with mind,” forcing the thoughts to stop with unremitting and unrestrained effort. He also recommended the formal concentration practices of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (see Lovingkindness, The

Revolutionary Art of Happiness, by Sharon Salzberg, or Training the Mind, by Chogyam Trungpa).

Right Thought and the Aegean Stables

Those familiar with cognitive restructuring will notice great similarities between this 2,500-year-old approach and more modern techniques. These can help develop morality and also suppress the hindrances that cause distraction and poor concentration, as well as begin to create better mental and personal habits. However, this can have its problems if not understood in a realistic and clear way.

A subtle but incorrect modification of these techniques can create a large amount of internal conflict, as can failing to understand the limitations of such techniques. The subtle modification that is definitely not recommended but all too common is the following: the student substitutes feelings of self-judgment or self-loathing for the thoughts they feel are unskillful. This results from only seeing the ignorance side and not the compassion side of intentions and thoughts. It can produce some extremely detrimental results, as well as highly neurotic and repressed individuals who are in basic denial of their actual humanity and heart. It can produce students who are quite bitter, tight, judgmental, Puritanical, and generally unpleasant to be around. This is one extreme.

The other extreme tends to come when people only focus on the compassion side of their emotions and not the confusion and suffering that can be mixed in with them. Aspects of late 1960s come to mind.

This error can lead to extreme misunderstandings of Tantra, unhealthy Epicureanism, addictions, and general debauchery that are simply destructive. While this may seem fun and “liberating” for a while, the consequences tend to be as bad as would be expected. Thus,

a sophisticated examination of our hearts, desires, aversions and confusions can help sort out what aspects of these are skillful and worth cultivating and what aspects are unhelpful and worth abandoning by the various methods available.

The last problem comes from not understanding that the only way to really bring some permanent relief from these persistent and somewhat uncontrollable thoughts is to get quite enlightened. Until this happens, even in the early stages of awakening, the “defilements” of the mind will continue to cause the creation of all kinds of unhelpful thoughts and mind noise that are easy to get caught in and fooled by.

Thus, while training in thought restraint can be very helpful and is highly 125

recommended, it should not be viewed as being more powerful than it is. Remember that training in morality and concentration does not produce awakening without training in insight. This point is mentioned again and again, but somehow continues to be overlooked.

A useful analogy is that of the Aegean Stables. The story goes that one of Hercules’ tasks was to clean the Aegean Stables. These housed a very large number of horses that continually produced great mounds of excrement. He tried again and again with superhuman strength to clean them, but there were too many horses producing too much excrement too fast for him. As soon as he had cleaned one area, the other areas were full of manure, and so he despaired. However, when he diverted a great river through the stables, this was able to wash the whole of the stables clean at once, and his task was accomplished. While the sensations that make up our reality are still misunderstood, we can feel a bit like Hercules before he diverted the river. This is par for the course and normal.

Enlightenment is a sudden thing, but the cultivation of that initial awakening is a gradual thing and proceeds in fairly predictable stages (detailed in Part III). For more information on this topic, I recommend the excellent works of Chi Nul, presented in Tracing Back the Radiance as translated by Robert Buswell. At each progressive stage, certain unhelpful patterns of identification with experience are forever eliminated or overcome, sort of like channeling a river through one part of the stables, but many more remain until final and complete awakening. Thus, the mind becomes progressively clearer, more spacious and quieter, and those unskillful thoughts regarding identification that do arise are more likely to be caught before they can do damage.

Thus, those who wish for the end of suffering should strive to be kind, stabilize the mind, and carefully and precisely understand the

actual truth of their experience in each moment in a way that goes beyond content.

19.FROM CONTENT TO INSIGHT

In the previous chapter, I explained a method of cognitive restructuring that was designed to help us stop thinking distracting or unhelpful thoughts. As those techniques have an agenda for what happens, rather than an agenda for perceiving something fundamental about whatever happens, they are an aspect of training in morality or concentration. However, if we are willing to realize that we can also take an insight-oriented perspective on difficult or distracting thoughts, either on the cushion or when walking around, then we can begin to make the transition from content to insight.

As you would expect, this method is grounded squarely in the Three Characteristics, as well as the other basic assumptions of insight practices, such as one's current sensate experience being the gold standard for reality. This method is probably best shown by way of examples, in this case of a few people with a Big Issue who are on an insight meditation retreat and reporting their experiences to their teacher.

The first example is of someone who is completely buying into the content. "So, in my practice I have been working through my Big Issue, you know, really trying to deal with it. It just seems to come back again and again. Every time I sit on the cushion, I find myself thinking about my Big Issue again. This Big Issue is such a big part of my life, such a huge issue. I am afraid that if I look too closely at my Big Issue it will overwhelm me. I wish my Big Issue would just go away. I have been doing so much practice, and yet I still have to deal with this darned Big Issue." Notice that the person assumes continuity of the existence of the Big Issue. They also assume that all thoughts about the Big Issue are either self, the property of self, or separate from self. Further, they are not working at a sensate level, trying to see the true nature of the thoughts and physical sensations that make up the Big Issue and the rest of their reality. In short, the "practice" they mention is some sort of practice other than insight practice. Let's try that again.

"I sat down on the cushion, and I had barely begun to practice noticing my breath when a thought about my Big Issue arose. I tried to ignore it, but then more thoughts about Big Issue arose, and my stomach began to feel queasy. I tried to focus on the breath again, but

then I found myself thinking about the Big Issue again, thought after thought, mostly the same old thoughts repeating again and again."

This person is already making progress towards using these thoughts and physical sensations as a basis for insights. They are beginning to try to apply the assumptions of insight practices to their experience. They are trying to focus on a physical object, trying to notice the individual sensations that make up their thoughts and physical sensations.

However, they have poor concentration and have not learned to see the true nature of the sensations that make these up.

"I sat down on the cushion, and I tried to see each of the sensations that make up the breath. Interspersed with these physical sensations were mental images of the breath. Interspersed with all of these sensations were also thoughts about the Big Issue. They were quick and seemed to also involve some mildly painful or disconcerting physical sensations in the region of my stomach. I could see these come and go and that they were observed. I could feel as they arose that there was something irritating about these quick sensations.

"I noticed that most of my experience was made of sensations that didn't seem to relate to that Big Issue. Sometimes I noticed the three characteristics of the sensations that seem to be related to the old Big Issue pattern of sensations, and sometimes I was able to stay with the sensations of breathing. However, regardless of which sensations arose, I was generally able to see some aspect of the true nature of them. Thus, I find that I am able to keep practicing and not get lost in old, circular thoughts about that Big Issue that do me little good and have caused me much pain."

These are the sorts of descriptions that really light up a meditation teacher's eyes. They can see that this is a person who really is getting a sense of what is insight practice and how it can be useful. The meditator not only understands the focus and assumptions of insight practices but are also able to actually do fairly consistent and strong practice. Even being able to do this when we are walking around and dealing with our stuff can be helpful. Shifting to the sensate level reveals things about our stuff that can be very helpful for keeping it in perspective and not getting overwhelmed by it. It also develops habits that make it easier for us to shift to a sensate level when we do formal insight practice.

Thus, if you have an issue that keeps bugging you, try taking the time to see the Three Characteristics of the sensations that make it up as you go about your day, thinking, "The pattern of sensations that make up the Big Issue are quick, transient, and observed. I will do my best to notice this as those sensations occur. When speaking of the Big Issue to others and to myself, I will try to keep my descriptions at an

insight-oriented level. By seeing this Big Issue as objective and transient phenomena, I will not be lost in my negative and painful thoughts about my Big Issue. I will be able to bring more clarity and spaciousness to the Big Issue, able to bring more intelligence to the Big Issue, able to bring more common sense and balance to the Big Issue. If I can do this, it will be of great benefit to me. If I continue to wallow in my circular thoughts about my Big Issue that get me nowhere, I will simply experience unnecessary pain to little good effect. This is my plan and my resolve. Though I may fail again and again to be able to do this, eventually I will break the habit of not being able to see the true nature of the Big Issue and thus will grow in wisdom and happiness!" That's the way the game is played.

Just for fun, I will give two more examples from even more

advanced practitioners and how they might describe their practice. "I sat down on the cushion and began noticing the three characteristics of the sensations that make up experiential reality showing themselves. There were physical and mental sensations, all arising and vanishing quickly and effortlessly. I could see perhaps 5-15 sensations per second, primarily in the abdominal region, but there were many other little sensations coming in from all over, colors on the back of my eyelids, sounds from other meditators breathing. Occasionally, there were some quick sensations interspersed with these about that Big Issue, like little phantoms vanishing in a sea of flickering color and form. They caused no interruptions in my investigations, being just more sensations for investigation."

This is obviously a strong practitioner with solid insight skills. They know exactly what they are looking for and do so. They are willing to make time for bare sensate investigation. We cannot instantly make the transition to this sort of practice, but I am a firm believer that making clear exactly what we are looking for can make it much easier to actually 129

From Content to Insight

make the transition from content to insight. By observing what we are able to do and taking a look at what someone at the next higher skill-level can do, we will be able to proceed with more confidence that we are on the right track.

This last example is a description of practice from a particularly strong and advanced practitioner. "I sat down on the cushion and the cycles of insight presented themselves effortlessly. There was a shift, and very fine, fast vibrations arose instantly, dropping down quickly, and then they shifted out, getting vague for a few seconds. Concentration restabilized and revealed the quick ending of sensations one after the other, perhaps 5-10 per second, and then things began thickening somewhat, getting somewhat irritating, but vibrations

remained the predominant experience. It was just that their unsatisfactory aspect became more predominant, and there were a few sensations relating to the Big Issue.

"I may have noticed a few hints of what dualistic perspectives remain and the basic pain and confusion they cause. There was a shift, and a more panoramic and easy perspective arose, accompanied by more coherent and synchronized vibrations including most of sensate reality, including much of space, at perhaps 5-15 per second. There was a short period of barely noticeable but mature equanimity in the face of these as the vibrations became more inclusive. Any sense of practicing dropped away entirely.

"A minute later, two of the Three Characteristics presented

completely in quick succession, including the whole background of space, revealing something incomprehensible in the nature of subject and object, and reality vanished. Reality reappeared quiet, clear, beautiful and easy. I solidified space in that afterglow so as to enjoy the formless realms for a few minutes, rising up through them and back down to boundless space. A vision relating to the Big Issue arose.

"I stabilized on the vision, noticing the feeling of it, and before I knew it I was out of body, traveling in a strange realm, having interactions that replayed the issue of the Big Issue in symbolic or mythic form. I saw something about this issue that I never had before, how an old, unexamined and fictitious train of associations lead to my inability to come to some more balanced understanding of this issue.

This epiphany broke my concentration, and I returned to my body. I then dropped out of the formless realms, allowing a new insight cycle to begin again. When I got up off the cushion, I noticed that the psychological insights that arose in the other realm gave me an increased sense of humor and a more compassionate perspective towards those involved in this issue. They were just trying to be happy, just as we all are. It will be interesting to see how this plays out."

They have talent and a wide range of skills. They are not only an advanced insight practitioner, but they also have strong concentration skills and can even chance into some of the more unusual concentration attainments. Further, they even seem to be able to use their ability to travel out of body to gain relative insights into the content of their stuff.

Last, they are on the look out for the subtle signs of the limits of their insights. They are not only skilled, but they realize what they do not yet know. They are well on their way to mastering the core

teachings of the Buddha.

131

PART III: MASTERY

132

20.CONCENTRATION VS. INSIGHT

There is a lot of confusion on the differences between concentration practices and insight practices. This may be caused in part by the

"Mushroom Factor," or may be due in part to other factors, such as concentration practice being easier than insight practices and distinctly more pleasant most of the time. Concentration practices (samatha or samadhi practices) are meditation on a concept, an aggregate of many transient sensations, whereas insight practice is meditation on the many transient sensations just as they are. When doing concentration practices, one purposefully tries to fix or freeze the mind in a specific state, called an "absorption," "jhana" or "dyana." While reality cannot be frozen in this way, the illusion of solidity and stability certainly can be cultivated, and this is concentration practice.

Insight practices are designed to penetrate the Three Illusions of permane nce , sati sfactorines s and separate self so as to attain freedom. (N.B., the illusion of satisfactoriness has to do with the false sense that continuing to mentally create the illusion of a separate, permanent self will be satisfactory or helpful, and is not referring to some oppressive and fun-denying angst trip). Insight practices (various types of vipassana, dzogchen, zazen, etc.) lead to the progressive stages of the progress of insight. Insight practices tend to be difficult and somewhat disconcerting, as they are designed to deconstruct our deluded and much cherished views of the world and ourselves, though they can sometimes be outrageously blissful for frustratingly short periods.

Concentration states are basically always some permutation of great fun, extremely fascinating, seductive, spacious, blissful, peaceful, spectacular, etc. There is basically no limit to how interesting concentration practices can be. Insight practice stages and revelations can also be very interesting, but are not potentially addictive the way concentration states and side effects can be. Insight practices tend to be hard work most of the time even if that work is just surrendering to things as they are.

One of the factors that actually adds to the confusion is that the concentration state terminology (jhanas) is used in the original texts to describe both the progressively more sophisticated concentration states

Concentration vs. Insight

and also the progress of insight, with little delineation of which was which. This was solved to some degree a few hundred years later when the stages of the progress of insight were articulated in the canonical commentaries, but the original problem was not mentioned. It was only in the second half of the 20th Century that the problem was sorted out to some degree by the Burmese, and I will delineate the vipassana jhanas later.

To try to keep this clear in a way that the old texts simply don't, whenever I refer to jhana without mentioning whether I mean samatha or vipassana jhana, I always mean samatha jhana, a stable state produced by concentration practices. When I refer to those jhanas produced by insight practices, I will always call them vipassana jhanas.

Concentration practices develop concentration but they don't develop wisdom. The problem is that concentration states can easily fool people into thinking that they are the end goal of the spiritual path because these states can become so blissful, spacious, and even formless, and thus can closely match some imprecise descriptions or expectations of what awakening might be like.

However, concentration practices can be very helpful and are very important. Without at least some skill in concentration practices, insight meditation is virtually impossible. There is an esoteric debate in the ancient commentaries about some students who got enlightened without even attaining the lowest of the concentration states (the first jhana, explained later), practitioners called "dry insight workers," but I wouldn't bank on this being a common occurrence. Luckily, insight practices themselves can simultaneously develop concentration and insight, though the dangers of being seduced by concentration states can lie in wait there as well. In short, you must master the first jhana as a minimum basis for beginning the progress of insight, but this is all that is required for enlightenment.

So long as one is very clear about what is concentration practice and what is insight practice, which may not be as easy an understanding to come by as some might think, concentration practice beyond the first jhana can be helpful to the insight practitioner. All of the concentration states stabilize the mind, obviously, and this has four primary benefits.

First, just a movie camera that is shaking wildly will not be likely to 134

produce a clear or intelligible movie, so a mind that won't stay settled on an object will not clearly perceive the ultimate truth of it. Second, as concentration states cultivate deep clarity and stability on content, they are very useful for promoting deep and healing

psychological insights.

Put another way, if you want to bring up your stuff, do concentration practices.

Third, concentration states can be a welcome and valid vacation from stress, providing periods of very deep relaxation and peace that can be an extremely important part of a sane, compassionate and healthy lifestyle. The Buddha highly praised those who had mastery of the concentration states, and this should serve as a reminder to those who underestimate their great value or erroneously feel that not enjoying one's life is somehow "spiritual." Fourth, concentration practices can help the insight practitioner stay somewhat more mentally stable and balanced as their old concepts of their existence are rent asunder by insight practice. However, if these states end up blocking this process by solidifying a sense of self as being anything or creating aversion to clearly experiencing suffering then they become a hindrance.

This is a very tricky balance. If a student clings to stability or fluidity they will surely not make progress in insight. However, if they plunge into the fast and harsh vibratory experiences of insight practice without the soothing effects of concentration practice to help them stay somewhat grounded, the student can be a bit like someone who has taken a small dose (or a big dose in the worst cases) of LSD or drunk way too much coffee. I spent the first five years of my practice giving only a moderate amount of attention to the samatha jhanas and I now realize that this was probably an error.

Sometimes spiritual openings can be extreme and dramatic, and being able to slow things down and calm down can sometimes be very useful and skillful if we have to deal with the world and deal with these openings at the same time. In short, if you want to gunk up your insight practice because you simply need to slow down so as to be able to get on with your life or not completely flip out, such as to study for medical school boards, etc., one way to do this is to indulge in concentration states. Coupling this with formal resolutions to not make progress in insight can be very effective.

There are many concentration states, and they become progressively more refined as one masters them. A brief description of the concentration states follows. It is basically straight out of the standard texts and very accurate. Regardless of the tradition you are following, when you begin to get some mastery of its concentration practices you will go through these states in this order up to the level of your current ability, though some people can master skipping over jhanas.

The specific object of meditation may limit the level of jhana that can be attained, as well as color the experience of these states. Such details are spelled out in various canonical texts, such as The Vi

suddhimagga and the more readable but harder to find Vim

uttimagga .

Bhante Gunaratana's The Jhanas, included in his more complete work The Path of Serenity and Insight, is a scholarly work on the subject, as is Nyanatiloka's Path to Deliverance (published by the Buddhist Publication Society out of Sri Lanka).

Some of these texts (particularly the first two) go into long and sophisticated discussions about which posture and which object might be best suited to the individual proclivities of various types of people. It is unfortunate that this sort of information is not in common use today.

I suppose that a suit off the rack will work for most occasions, but there is something about one that has been tailor made. I am told that there are still a few monasteries that provide this sort of traditional training.

Unfortunately, this topic is way too complex to treat properly here, but those of you who are that serious about these subjects are highly advised to check out the original sources. They contain an astounding amount of powerful information but unfortunately make for fairly tedious reading.

Many traditions use the breath as the primary object initially and then shift to the qualities of the states themselves as the object of meditation when they arise and the concentration is strong. The quality of a jhana can either be "soft" or "hard" depending on how solidly one is in the state. In soft jhana, the qualities of that particular state are definitely recognizable in a way that is different from the ordinary experience of those qualities to the degree that we are confident we are in the altered state defined by those qualities.

In really hard jhana, it feels as if our mind has been fused to those qualities and the object with super glue, as if we were nothing but a solid block or field of those qualities or that object, as if they and the object were the whole world with nothing else remaining. Getting into really

"hard" jhana states dramatically increases the beneficial effects of the practice, though it takes greater strength of concentration and usually requires more favorable practice conditions to do so. Taking the beneficial factors of the jhana solely as the object of concentration is helpful for this, as can be using an easily identified external object

such as a candle flame or colored disk.

For detailed instructions in practices that use an external object, called “kasina” practices, the works listed above, particularly Bhante Gunaratana’s The Path of Serenity and Insight, provide such a good treatment of them that you should simply obtain and read those sources. However, the basic instructions are these: stabilize your concentration on an external object (kasina) until you can see the object with your eyes closed or when you are not looking at the object. Take that vision as the new object and stabilize your attention on it until your concentration is like a rock. From this foundation, you should be able to easily attain any of the states I am about to describe.

The basic pattern one goes through with these states is as follows.

First, one develops enough concentration to attain the jhana. Then the mind sees/feels the jhana, moves towards and into it, with almost all such state shifts occurring between the end of the out breath and the beginning of the new in breath, sometimes accompanied by the eyelids flickering. Then there is the honeymoon period, where the jhana is fresh but unsteady. Then there is the maturation period, when the jhana really comes into its own more solidly and shows its true glory. Then the faults of the jhana tend to become noticeable, as well as the proximity of the state to the state below it and the ease of falling into that lower state.

Next, the concentration deepens, and some sort of equanimity about the good and bad aspects of the jhana sets in. When the concentration grows strong enough and the current jhana is no longer desirable, the mind will naturally shift to the next higher jhana and the cycle goes around again within the limits of the humanly attainable states and your current skill level.

21.THE CONCENTRATION STATES (SAMATHA JHANAS)

THE FIRST JHANA

The first jhana arises after the student has gained the ability to actually steady the mind on some object such as the breath, i.e. after a state called “access concentration,” meaning the level of concentration needed to access the first jhana or insight practice. Notice that if we are spinning lost in thought this is basically impossible. If you wish to attain this, I would try to stay as completely as possible with an object for perhaps 1 minute. When you can do this, try for 10 minutes. When you can do this, try for an hour. For instance, if you were using the breath as an object, try to be aware of every single breath at least in part for a full ten minutes, and then for an hour. This is definitely possible, and a reasonable goal. Try not paying too much attention to

the individual sensations themselves, but conceptualize the breath as a coherent and continuous entity, with many different types of sensations all being thought of as being the breath. It is important to know that really getting into a sense of the breath as a continuous entity for 10 seconds will do you more good than being generally with the breath on and off for an hour.

Tune into the illusory smoothness of things by purposefully and calmly working with illusions of solidity or fluidity. There is a certain

"into it" quality which helps, sort of like really getting into a slow groove when playing an instrument, having sex, playing a sport, or just sinking into a well-deserved and warm bubble bath. Being in a silent and safe place is very helpful, as is giving yourself permission to relax, put the cares of the world behind you, and enjoy.

If you are using the breath as an object, you might try purposefully visualizing it as sweet, smooth waves or circles that are peaceful and welcome. Try breathing as if you were in a garden of fragrant roses and you wish to experience the fullness of their fragrance. Perhaps these tips will help illustrate the kind of non-resistant and peaceful presence that can help one attain these states. Tune into sensations in and around the primary object that feel good. Harbor no guilt, anxiety or fear related to the depths of pleasure, ease and well-being. The spiritual life need not

The Concentration States (Samatha Jhanas)

be some sort of relentless, austere grind, particularly when doing concentration practices.

As concentration improves, it is as though the mind "sees" the first jhana and grabs on to it. Having an idea of what you are looking for, i.e.

something enjoyable and steady, can be helpful for this. It has the five primary factors of applied and sustained effort or attention, rapture, happiness and concentration. Thus, it is great fun, feels good, but takes consistent effort to sustain. The attention is focused narrowly, as though one were looking at a small area of this page. This state can be quite a relief from the pain and discomfort of sitting meditation and can temporarily quiet the mind somewhat. As with all the concentration states, it is generally quite easy to concentrate on something that is very enjoyable. Thus, one's concentration skills may improve rapidly and easily after attaining the first jhana and tend to basically flounder until one has attained the first jhana. Thus, attaining the first jhana is really, really important.

People tend to really like this state, and may cling to it for the rest of the retreat if on retreat, or cultivate it again and again in their sitting practice at home. It is a valuable attainment, as it serves as the minimum foundation for both insight and concentration practices.

From the first jhana there are basically three things a meditator can do. They can either get stuck there (I know someone who spent some twenty years cultivating the first jhana in their daily practice and thinking this was insight practice), they can progress to the second jhana, or they can

investigate the first jhana and thus begin the progress of insight.

By "investigate" the state, I mean that they can direct their attention to breaking the illusion of the solidity of that state into its component individual sensations so that one can understand their true nature, i.e.

the Three Characteristics, as is done in insight practice with all objects.

Special attention must be paid to trying to experience the precise arising and passing of every individual sensation that makes up the state, particularly the primary beneficial factors of the state listed above.

While it is not actually possible to perceive the arising and passing of every single sensation or to even be mindful of every sensation, it is definitely possible to be clear about enough of them to get enlightened, and that is what matters. It is somewhat common for people to do this 140

The Concentration States (Samatha Jhanas)

half-heartedly and not pay particular attention to the myriad sensations that make up rapture and happiness, as they secretly wish them to be permanent, satisfy and be self or the property of self. Stagnation is basically guaranteed in insight practice if you cling to pleasant sensations in this way, or anything else for that matter. Put another way, if you fail to see the impermanence of objects, you will have artificially solidified them ("clung to" them) and will not gain insight from them.

The near enemy of the first samatha jhana is access concentration, and when the applied and sustained effort or attention flag somewhat, access concentration sets in. As the texts rightly say, the applied and sustained effort, i.e. the fact that you have to make effort to get into and stay in this state, are also somewhat annoying. This becomes more and more apparent, and clear awareness of just this simple fact while staying in the jhana causes the mind to eventually bail out of the first jhana and into the second jhana.

THE SECOND JHANA

The second jhana is like the first, i.e. a seemingly solidified mind state. With the dropping of almost all of applied and sustained effort the rapture and happiness factors created by concentration can really predominate. Thus, whereas the first jhana feels like something you need to pay attention to, the second jhana has the quality of showing

itself to you. The focus of attention widens out somewhat, sort of like looking straight ahead without focusing the eyes on anything specific.

Whereas mind-generated objects in the first jhana are stable, they will move (e.g. spin, pulse, resonate, etc.) in the second jhana in ways that correlate with the phase of the breath, moving slowly towards the top and bottom of the breath and more quickly in the middle.

The silence of the mind is noticeably increased, and the pleasure of this state may increase greatly as well, particularly if pleasure is the focus of attention. When this state is really cultivated, the intensity of the pleasure of this state can become pretty much as strong you can stand it.

Again, this state is a fine attainment but can be quite captivating. Some may get stuck cultivating this again and again for some period of time ranging from days to years. Again, the meditator also has the option to try to go on to the third jhana or to investigate this state and begin the 141

The Concentration States (Samatha Jhanas)

progress of insight, paying careful attention to completely deconstructing the state into its moment-to-moment components.

THE THIRD JHANA

If the meditator decides to go on to the third jhana, then just cultivating the second state more deeply and noticing that the rapture or emotional “wow factor” of that state eventually becomes annoying can cause the mind to eventually abandon this state and shift into the third jhana.

In this state, the rapture drops away, and what is left is more cool

“bodily” bliss and equanimity with a lot of mindfulness of what is going on. (It must be noted that it is possible to be so deeply into any jhana, even the first jhana, that the sense of the body is quite vague, distorted or even entirely absent, so this must be kept in mind when reading these descriptions.)

The attention is now in wide focus, sort of like resting in the half of space that is in front of one’s self. The third jhana is like the counterpoint to the focus of attention of the second jhana. In the second jhana, wherever we look we see clearly, whereas in the third jhana the wide periphery of our attention is clear and the center of our attention is murky. This can be extremely confusing until one gets used to it, and trying to stay with one object in the center in the third jhana will cause the meditator to miss what this state has to offer and teach. Moving from the second to the third jhana is like going from focusing on the donut hole to focusing on the outer edge of the donut, except that now you are sitting in the center of the donut. Remember this when you get to descriptions of the Dark Night in the section on the stages of insight, as the Dark Night has as its foundation the third

jhana but adds the Three Characteristics. Focusing on the wide periphery is a more inclusive, broader, more sophisticated and complex kind of concentration than the first two jhanas, like going from listening to Elvis to listening to very complex, dissonant Jazz.

In its pure and simple spaciousness, profound clarity, balance and contentment, the third jhana is even better than the second jhana. It is no wonder that people can easily mistake these states for enlightenment, as they can seem to fit the descriptions of what enlightenment might be like. Remember that enlightenment is not a mind state, nor is it 142

dependent on any condition of reality. It does not come and go as these states do.

Again, from this state, the meditator has a few options. They can get stuck, which definitely happens, they can move on to the fourth jhana, or they can investigate this state and begin the progress of insight. This would require extra special attention to make sure that all of the specific sensations that make up peace, equanimity, bliss and spaciousness are clearly observed to arise and pass, not satisfy, and not be self or the property of self.

These qualities are not easy to let go of, and so this can be difficult.

However, upon leaving such a state, the mind will still have a measure of the good qualities of the state. This can be useful to insight practice if one is willing to not cling to such things. This applies to the other states as well, and this is why many teachers have their students master concentration states before they move on to insight practice. On the other hand, such states can be so intoxicating and such a stagnant dead end for those that become fooled by them that some teachers have their students avoid them like the plague until they have some very deep insights into the truth of things.

THE FOURTH JHANA

As before, if the student wishes to go on to the fourth jhana, then they just cultivate the third jhana and begin to pay attention to the fact that even the bodily bliss is somewhat irritating or noisy. Eventually, the mind will abandon the third jhana and shift into the fourth jhana, which is the height of equanimity. This state is remarkable in its simple spaciousness and acceptance. The extreme level of imperturbability would be astounding if there was not such pronounced imperturbability.

This is by far the most restful of the first four jhanas.

The focus of attention is now largely panoramic and thus even saying “focus” here is a bit problematic. In the first jhana the object was finally clear but static and solid that we can stay with. In the

second jhana the object begins showing itself and some simple motion is allowed. In the third jhana we go from a spot of attention to a wide circle of attention and the motion gets more complex, so we now have two spatial dimensions and time. In the fourth jhana things get three-dimensional and mind-made objects such as visualizations take on a life 143

of their own, becoming living, luminous and transparent. The fourth jhana includes space and awareness in a way that the previous three do not. Mindfulness is considered to be perfected due to equanimity, though this factor does not stand out as in the third jhana. When we are really in this state, the basic sense we have of where our body is and what it looks like can get very vague or even vanish entirely, though this is less true if we are in this state with our eyes open.

This is quite a high attainment, and can easily be confused with the goal of the spiritual life, though it very much isn't. From this state the student has quite a number of options. They can get stuck, they can move on to the formless realms, they can cultivate what are described as

"psychic powers," or they can investigate this state and begin the progress of insight. When investigating this state, special attention must absolutely be given to the fact that the myriad sensations that make up equanimity and spaciousness come and go moment to moment, do not satisfy or provide a permanent resting place, and are not self.

Again, it is easy to get attached to the sensations that make up these high states, and so great precision and attention (as well as honesty) must be given to this if the student chooses this option. Another alternative is to leave this state and then begin insight practice, as the qualities that this state writes on the mind linger for a short time, and this can be helpful if the student does not cling to these benefits.

THE "PSYCHIC POWERS"

As to the "psychic powers" ("siddhis" in Pali), the texts list all kinds of special abilities that may be cultivated using the fourth jhana (or perhaps lower or higher jhanas) as a base, and these are attained today.

These may include all kinds of strange experiences, including full blown and extremely realistic experiences of other realms that can seem quite magical and fall quite in line with what one might think of when one thinks of various "psychic powers."

Whether or not these are "real" is a question that I am happy to avoid, though these experiences can be so extremely vivid that they

can seem more “real” than the “real world.” Much more interesting than the question of what is real is the question of what is causal, i.e. what leads to what. For example, we might decide that our dreams are not

“real”, but we must admit that there are real world consequences of 144

having dreams. All this can be a slippery business, and the “psychic powers” generally don’t turn out to be quite what they seem. As one of my friends once said, “Yeah, I can fly, but just not in this realm!” Buyer beware, or proceed with care.

On the other hand, it does seem to be possible through powerful intent, strong concentration ability, appreciation of interdependence and careful experimentation to manipulate what we might call “this world”, as well as those in it, in very unusual and profound ways. Yes, I am referring to such things as telekinesis, mind control, reading other peoples thoughts, pyromancy, and all of that. The more you get your concentration and insight trips together and the more you look into the magical aspect of things, the more you will learn about what I will call the magical laws of the universe and how to use your will to manipulate it.

However, if you don’t have your morality trip really together, and perhaps even if you do, I would be quite cautious about formally and consciously tapping into that sort of power. It is absolutely vital to remember that you will reap what you sow and that like leads to like when considering the formal use of such power. Kind intention is absolutely essential, but even this is often not enough to keep us from screwing up when we give into the temptation to formally manipulate the world in unusual ways. Power corrupts, as the old adage goes.

Spiritual traditions across the board have a clear love/hate relationship to the powers, and if you begin playing around with them you will come to understand why. The stories of the Buddha

demonstrate clearly that he and those around him simultaneously found them extremely fascinating, occasionally useful, and often profound.

They also found them dangerous, a sidetrack and abhorrent. Just as with any powerful energy, such as sexual energy, the powers tend to reveal our true colors, as it were.

When playing around with the powers, I recommend careful

attention to how we define “real” and the practical implications of our personal definition of “real” for our daily life. For instance, you might have just come back from a retreat where you were playing around with visualization abilities, and a few days later see a troop of radiant angels 145

floating through the walls and into your living room where you are entertaining guests. This was your actual experience.

Whether you choose to ignore them, give them lots of attention, mention them to your guests, get down on your knees and begin praying, or run screaming out the door will have different implications for your actual life. These implications should be carefully considered when conducting yourself in the face of such experiences. On a side note, if you have learned to see angels, you will probably run into devils soon enough.

As to the more manipulative powers, you might begin to get the sense that you can read the thoughts and emotions of others. Do you want to tell them this, or even act on these intuitive feelings on the assumption that they are correct? You might get the sense that you can manipulate the emotions or energetic states of others in ways that would be considered magical. Is this a good idea? There are no easy answers to some of the ethical and practical questions that can arise from the powers, but I would advise a high level of caution and restraint. Respect other's rights and remember that actions done for other than compassionate reasons are likely to cause an ugly backlash.

The experiences of the "psychic powers" can be infinitely

fascinating, as anything you can imagine experiencing is possible. The powers can also lead to people getting really, really weird. If you want to get to know about your shadow side, this is one way to have a crash course. For instance, it might be very educational to have your relationship issues with your parents manifest as two large, slobbering demons who hurl flaming stuffed animals at you while you are traveling out of your body to the Grand Canyon, but it can often take lots of time and reflection to figure out how these sorts of experiences make a practical difference in our lives.

As one Burmese man once said to a friend of mine, "My brother does concentration practice. You know, sometimes they go a little mad!" He was talking about what can sometimes happen when people get into "psychic powers." Remember, most of these experiences are sufficient grounds for a diagnosis of mental illness in the conventional medical world, particularly if they begin to interfere with love and work, so seek the guidance of those who simultaneously appear to be quite 146

sane and functional who also know how to navigate skillfully in this territory. Finding these sorts of people is difficult but well worth the effort.

Also, playing around with visions and other extrasensory

experiences, such as traveling out of body, bilocation, etc., can

sometimes cause one to feel ungrounded, disconnected, otherworldly and scattered for hours or even days afterwards, something I call a “

siddhi hangover.” Exercise and focusing on anything physical can help, as can heavy foods, orgasms and simply not practicing for a while.

Very strong insight practices with a focus on impermanence can also help to break up these experiences but are not particularly grounding in and of themselves and may often be otherwise. Strongly stated resolutions to not experience or use the powers can also be very helpful, such as simply saying out loud, “I formally resolve that I will not experience or use these powers (name them here) until I formally resolve otherwise.”

I would suggest care and caution in dealing with all the visions and other supernormal or paranormal experiences which might arise in practice. The primary danger is taking them too seriously and thus assuming that they are more important than they really are. It may be a good idea to leave them until very late in one’s practice unless one has someone around to guide them through their skillful use or unless one is fairly balanced and has a good sense of humor about them. If not, they can very easily become further tools of our defilements, long psychedelic and manipulative tunnels to nowhere or destruction.

I remember a letter I received from a friend who was supposed to be on an intensive insight meditation retreat but had slipped into playing with these sorts of experiences. He was now fascinated by his ability to see spirit animals and other supernormal beings and was having regular conversations with some sort of low-level god that kept telling him that he was making excellent progress in his insight practice, i.e. exactly what he wanted to hear. However, the fact that he was having stable visionary experiences and was buying into their content made it abundantly clear that he wasn’t doing insight practices at all, but was lost in and being fooled by these siddhis. You get the picture. Now, don’t get me wrong.

If one is looking for another way to address one’s content and stuff, 147

visions of things like spirit animals can be very helpful. The trick is not to mix up content and fundamental insight.

“Psychic powers” can be used skillfully as well, and there are whole traditions that use them as their primary path. They can significantly broaden one’s horizons and are so interesting that great depths of profoundly steady concentration can easily be developed. They can increase the intensity of our “mental” processes to such a high level that they become very easy to see as they are, should we choose to do so.

They can also begin to blur the line between the “mental” and the “physical” in ways that can be both disorienting and profound.

When we start playing around with intentions, extended sensate realities and energetic phenomena, it can seem as if there are two worlds or fields of experience that interpenetrate each other, the ordinary one (“the real world”) and the magical one (“second attention,” “astral plane,” “spirit world,” etc.). Integrating these two perspectives into one causal field without artificial dualities or boundaries is quite a project, one with the potential to lead to very high levels of realization or to madness. It is the high-stakes way to play the game, but unfortunately seems to be largely unavoidable past a certain point.

The experiences of the powers can help people live in the world in a way that is at once appreciative of its richness and yet not overly serious about it or fixated on it. At their best, they can serve as a basis for a very deep exploration of sides of ourselves that we rarely see with such clarity, particularly the territory detailed by the likes of Jung and the Shamanic traditions. Occasionally, such experiences can bring profound epiphanies, times when we see our issues and shadow sides so clearly that our lives are definitely transformed for the better.

While this next point might sound a bit radical, there are good reasons to assume that we are all acting at what might be considered a magical level all the time and just doing it with little awareness of that fact. The best argument I know of for learning how to work at the level of the powers is to bring consciousness and compassion to a process that is happening already. Said another way, as we are already casting spells all the time, actually any time there is awareness and intent, we might as well learn to do it well.

On the other hand, playing around with siddhis can bring up really screwed up stuff from our subconscious that we are just not ready or able handle skillfully, causing “siddhi bleedthrough” into our lives that is simply unhelpful and very hard to integrate. Actually, when playing around with any meditative technology, there is no free lunch. You always end up being forced to face some further challenge having to do with personal or spiritual growth, either then or shortly thereafter.

There doesn’t seem to be any getting around this.

If you want to cultivate the siddhis, one must generally attain very

“hard” jhanaic states with the specifically intention to attain these experiences, though they can and often do arise spontaneously as well.

The

Visuddhimagga and The

Vimuttimagga (less encyclopedic and
harder to find but much more readable) both spell out how to attain

"psychic powers" in great depth and detail. You could also check out Bhante Gunaratana's excellent work, The Path of Serenity and Insight.

Simply follow the directions and explore, as they are as accurate it gets.

One should also see Sutta #2, The Fruits of the Homeless Life, in The Long Discourses of the Buddha, for more information on all of the concentration states and psychic powers.

While magical or mythical thinking is generally very unhelpful on the spiritual path, it must be admitted that it is the only kind of thinking that can make much sense of these sorts of experiences. However, know when to turn it on and when to shut it off. If you are doing Jungian psychotherapy, shamanic pathworking, working up the Tree of Life or through the Tarot, or similar work, think as magically and mythically as you wish. It might actually be very helpful. If you are trying to do most other things, don't!

While Theravada Buddhism clearly states how to obtain the

"psychic powers," it does not say much about how to use them, the benefits of them, or their dangers. Tantra and many other traditions (such as some of the shamanic traditions) do a much better job of dealing with these. One might also check out the later writings of Carlos Castanada when he was not so fascinated with hallucinogens (such as The Art of Dreaming), go to an ashram that focuses on these aspects of spiritual training, or check out traditions such as Ceremonial Magick, Wicca, Thelema, the Golden Dawn, and the A.'.A.'..

Note, I will use the word magick with a "k" at times due to being influenced by this and related traditions, as they advocate making a distinction between show magic (illusions based on mechanisms and slight of hand) and the territory of the powers or real magick. Donald Michael Kraig's Modern Magick is a classic on the subject, as are the works of Aleister Crowley. Opinions on Crowley vary widely, but buried in his frustrating works is gold that is hard to find elsewhere. Despite all his quirks and failings, I have a deep appreciation for many synchretic aspects of his work and the depths of his dedication to making meditation and magick accessible.

It is also possible to use the experiences of the psychic powers, particularly the visions and traveling out of body, as a basis for insight practice by the standard method of bare sensate investigation with a focus on the Three Characteristics of those sensations, as they arise out of extremely high levels of clarity and concentration. These experiences can also be so otherworldly in content that our normal fixations and preoccupations may be left behind. Experiences of insight in these realms can be staggering and awesome. They are not soon forgotten.

Tantric visualization practices at their best make powerful use of this fact. By definition, if you have visualized a 3D intelligent entity that is doing its own thing, you are in strong concentration in the fourth jhana and it is just a question of seeing the Three Characteristics of that to get some serious insight.

"Psychic powers" can also arise spontaneously from insight practice, particularly at stage 4. The Arising and Passing Away and sometimes at stage 11. Equanimity (see The Progress of Insight later). While the fourth jhana is traditionally said to be the basis for the psychic powers, simply getting so strongly into the first jhana that you can no longer perceive a body coupled with the previous intention to have these experiences can sometimes be a sufficient to make them occur. Get really into the jhana, leave it, resolve to have these experiences, and see what happens. Repeat as necessary. If that doesn't work, learn to visualize the colors white, blue, red and yellow clearly as stable experiences and then repeat the above instruction. If that doesn't work, find the rare teacher who will actually guide you into this esoteric territory. Better, find a good teacher before getting into this territory!

If all of that is not enough, here is my best advice for working with the powers formally. Once you have enough concentration to get into hard fourth jhana with a range of objects and colors, here's traditional Buddhist Magick 101 with some practical points thrown in:

1. Make the bases clean, meaning bathe quietly and put on clean clothes. This instruction helps but is not necessary.

2. Find a suitable place to work, meaning a place that is quiet and free of distractions. If you can't find such a place or you feel compelled to do magick in less than optimal circumstances

(such as in public on the fly), obviously skip this step.

3. Think the whole thing through before you proceed. Never, ever skip this step if you can possibly help it. This step not only helps to keep you from seriously screwing up, it is actually part of the spell and a very important part of the set-up. Essential things to include are:

a. what you are asking for,

b. how to phrase it or intend it, being as specific as you possibly can,

c. why you are asking for that, particularly if there is some more fundamental desire you hope to fulfill that you should focus on while letting the less important specifics happen as they may,

d. exactly who or what is involved,

e. and every single possible good and bad ramification of what you are about to do that you can possibly think of. Really take your time with this one, visualizing the whole thing out in time and space as far as it could possibly go.

f. Note: if the ethics of what you are going to do feel at all strange in any part of your being, particularly your heart or gut, you probably need to go back up to the top and rethink the whole thing while looking at the problem from other points of view.

4. Rise from the first to the fourth jhana. Build each one up carefully and fully along the way so that you have a good foundation from which to work. Those who can access the formless realms (discussed shortly) might rise all the way

through them as well. Then leave the fourth (or eighth) jhana and formally intend to make whatever you want to occur happen, which is to say let the full energy of your intention fly without hesitation or restraint. If you are going to do this, make sure you commit to it, which is why the third step is so important.

5. Let it go and see what happens.

One last warning on the powers: doing these things in the private is one thing, doing magickal things in public that involve other people is something else entirely. If you do overt public magick or discrete public magick, you are bound to run into someone else's paradigms, values, and sets of beliefs about how the world is and what is possible that are not in alignment with your own. The potential for bad reactions from others is very real for a large number of reasons. Consider the long, strange relationship between the Western mainstream point of view and everything from witchcraft to crime solving psychics. In short, if you do formal magick and anyone else finds out about it or thinks they were affected by it, be ready for the possibility of serious backlash and fallout.

The formless realms are the last option one can follow from the fourth jhana, and they can definitely be very useful for putting things

into perspective and sorting out a few details about “awareness” (as will be mentioned below). Before I go into the formless realms, I will digress for just a moment to a brief and belated discussion of...

22.NO-SELF VS. TRUE SELF

This is one of those questions that tends to arise when Hinduism or Christianity come in contact with Buddhism. However, perhaps it should arise more when Buddhism is thinking about itself. I include this discussion here because it addresses some points that are useful for later and previous discussions. True Self and no-self are actually talking about the same thing, just from different perspectives. Each can be useful, but each is an extreme. Truly, the truth is a Middle Way between these and is indescribable, but I will try to explain it anyway in the hope that it may support actual practice. It may seem odd to put a chapter that deals with the fruits of insight practices in the middle of descriptions of the samatha jhanas, but hopefully when you read the next chapter you will understand why it falls where it does.

For all you intellectuals out there, the way in which this chapter is most likely to support practice is to be completely incomprehensible and thus useless. Ironically, I have tried to make this chapter very clear, and in doing so have crafted a mess of paradoxes. In one of his plays, Shakespeare puts philosophers on par with lawyers. In terms of insight practice, a lawyer who is terrible at insight practices but tries to do them anyway is vastly superior to a world-class philosopher who is merely an intellectual master of this theory but practices not at all.

Remember that the spiritual life is something you do and hopefully understand but not some doctrine to believe. Those of you who are interested in the formal Buddhist dogmatic anti-dogma should check out the particularly profound suttas, #1, The Root of All Things, in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, as well as sutta #1, The Supreme Net (What the Teaching is Not), in The Long Discourses of the Buddha.

Again, realize that all of this language is basically useless in the end and prone to not making much sense. Only examination of our reality will help us to actually directly understand this, but it will not be in a way accessible to the rational mind. Nothing in the content of our thoughts can really explain the experience of the understanding I am about to point to, though there is something in the direct experience of those thoughts that might reveal it. Everything that I am about to try to explain

here can become a great entangling net of useless views without direct insight.

Many of the juvenile and tedious disputes between the various insight traditions result from fixation on these concepts and inappropriate adherence to only one side of these apparent paradoxes.

Not surprisingly, these disputes between insight traditions generally arise from those with little or no insight. One clear mark of the development of true insight is that these paradoxes lose their power to confuse and obscure. They become tools for balanced inquiry and instruction, beautiful poetry, intimations of the heart of the spiritual life and of one's own direct and non-conceptual experience of it.

No-self teachings directly counter the sense that there is a separate watcher, and that this watcher is an "I" that is in control, observing reality or subject to the tribulations of the world. Truly, this is a useful illusion to counter. However, if misunderstood, this teaching can produce a shadow side that reeks of nihilism, disengagement with life and denial. People can get all fixated on eliminating a "self," when the emphasis is supposed to be on the words "separate" and "permanent,"

as well as on the illusion that is being creating. A better way to say this would be, "stopping the process of mentally creating the illusion of a separate self from sensations that are inherently non-dual, utterly transient and thus empty of any separate, permanent self."

Even if you get extremely enlightened, you will still be here from a conventional point of view, but you will also be just an interdependent and intimate part of this utterly transient universe, just as you actually always have been. The huge and yet subtle difference is that this will be known directly and clearly. The language "eliminating your ego" is similarly misunderstood most of the time.

You see, there are physical phenomena and mental phenomena, as well as the "consciousness" or mental echo of these, which is also in the category of mental phenomena. These are just phenomena, and all phenomena are not a permanent, separate self, as they all change and are all intimately interdependent. They are simply "aware," i.e. manifest, where they are without any observer of them at all. The boundaries that seem to differentiate self from not-self are arbitrary and conceptual, i.e.

not the true nature of things. Said another way, reality is intimately interdependent and non-dual, like a great ocean.

There is also "awareness", but awareness is not a thing or localized in a particular place, so to even say "there is also awareness" is already a tremendous problem, as it implies separateness and existence where none can be found. To be really philosophically

correct about it, borrowing heavily from Nagarjuna, awareness cannot be said to fit any of the following descriptions: that it exists, that it does not exist, that it both exists and does not exist, that it neither exists nor doesn't exist. Just so, in truth, it cannot be said that: we are awareness, that we are not awareness, that we are both awareness and not awareness, or even that we are neither awareness nor not awareness. We could go through the same pattern with whether or not phenomena are intrinsically luminous.

For the sake of discussion, and in keeping with standard Buddhist thought, awareness is permanent and unchanging. It is also said that,

"All things arise from it, and all things return to it," though again this implies a false certainty about something which is actually impenetrably mysterious and mixing the concept of infinite potential with awareness is a notoriously dangerous business. We could call it "God," "Nirvana,"

"The Tao," "The Void," "Allah," "Krishna," "Intrinsic Luminosity,"

"Buddha Nature," "Buddha," "Bubba" or just "awareness" as long as we realize the above caveats, especially that it is not a thing or localized in any particular place and has no definable qualities. Awareness is sometimes conceptualized as pervading all of this while not being all of this, and sometimes conceptualized as being inherent in all of this while not being anything in particular. Neither is quite true, though both perspectives can be useful.

If you find yourself adopting any fixed idea about what we are calling

"awareness" here, try also adopting its logical opposite to try to achieve some sense of direct inquisitive paradoxical imbalance that shakes fixed views about this stuff and points to something beyond these limited concepts. This is incredibly useful advice for dealing with all teachings about "Ultimate Reality." I would also recommend looking into the true nature of the sensations that make up philosophical speculation and all sensations of questioning.

No-self vs. True Self

While phenomena are in flux from their arising to their passing, there is awareness of them. Thus, awareness is not these objects, as it is not a thing, nor is it separate from these objects, as there would be no experience if this were so. By examining our reality just as it is, we may come to understand this.

Further, phenomena do not exist in the sense of abiding in a fixed way for any length of time, and thus are utterly transitory, and yet the laws that govern the functioning of this utter transience hold. That phenomena do not exist does not mean that there is not a reality, but that this reality is completely inconstant, except for awareness, which

is not a thing. This makes no sense to the rational mind, but that is how it is with this stuff.

One teaching that comes out of the Theravada that can be helpful is that there are Three Ultimate Dharmas or ultimate aspects of reality: materiali ty (the sensations of the first five sense doors), mentalit y (all mental sensations) and Ni rvana (though they would call it “Nibbana,”

which is the Pali equivalent of the Sanskrit). In short, this is actually it, and “that” which is beyond this is also it. Notice that “awareness” is definitely not on this list. It might be conceptualized as being all three (from a True Self point of view), or quickly discarded as being a useless concept that solidifies a sense of a separate or localized “watcher” (from the no-self point of view).

Buddhism also contains a strangely large number of True Self teachings, though if you told most Buddhists this they would give you a good scolding. Many of these have their origins in Hindu Vedanta and Hindu Tantra. All the talk of Buddha Nature, the Bodhisattva Vow, and that sort of thing are True Self teachings. True Self teachings point out that this “awareness” is “who we are,” but it isn’t a thing, so it is not self.

They also point out that we actually are all these phenomena, rather than all of these phenomena being seen as something observed and thus not self, which they are also as they are utterly transient and not awareness. This teaching can help students actually examine their reality just as it is and sort of “inhabit it” in a honest and realistic way, or it can cause them to cling to things as “self” if they misunderstand this teaching. I will try again...

You see, as all phenomena are observed, they cannot possibly be the observer. Thus, the observer, which is awareness and not any of the phenomena pretending to be it, cannot possibly be a phenomenon and thus is not localized and doesn’t exist. This is no-self. However, all of these phenomena are actually us from the point of view of non-duality and interconnectedness, as the illusion of duality is just an illusion.

When the illusion of duality permanently collapses in final awakening, all that is left is all of these phenomena, which is True Self, i.e. the lack of a separate self and thus just all of this as it is. Remember, however, that no phenomena abide for even an instant, and so are empty of permanent abiding and thus of stable existence.

This all brings me to one of my favorite words, “non-dual,” a word that means that both duality and unity fail to clearly describe ultimate reality. As “awareness” is in some way separate from and

unaffected by phenomena, we can't say that that unity is the true answer. Unitive experiences arise out of strong concentration and can easily fool people into thinking they are the final answer. They are not.

That said, it is because "awareness" is not a phenomena, thing or localized in any place that you can't say that duality is true. A duality implies something on both sides, an observer and an observed.

However, there is no phenomenal observer, so duality does not hold up under careful investigation. Until we have a lot of fundamental insight, the sense that duality is true can be very compelling and can cause all sorts of trouble. We extrapolate false dualities from sensations until we are very highly enlightened.

Thus, the word "non-dual" is an inherently paradoxical term, one that confounds reason and even our current experience of reality. If we accept the working hypothesis that non-duality is true, then we will be able to continue to reject both unitive and dualistic experiences as the true answer and continue to work towards awakening. This is probably the most practical application of discussions of no-self and True Self.

No-self and True Self are really just two sides of the same coin.

There is a great little poem by one Kalu Rinpoche that goes something like:

We live in illusion
And the appearance of things.

There is a reality:
We are that reality.
When you understand this,
You will see that you are nothing.
And, being nothing,
You are everything.
That is all.

There are many fine poems on similar themes presented in Sogyal Rinpoche's The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying. It is because we are none of this that freedom is possible. It is because we are all of this that compassionate action for all beings and ourselves is so important. To truly understand this moment is to truly understand both, which is the Middle Way between these two extremes (see Nisargadatta's I Am That for a very down-to-earth discussion of these issues). While only insight practices will accomplish this, there are some concentration attainments (the last four jhanas or Formless Realms) that can really help put things in proper perspective, though they do not directly cause deep insights and awakening unless the true nature of the

sensations that make them up is understood.

23.THE FORMLESS REALMS

The formless realms never fail to impress and amaze. They can also be taken to be much more significant than they really are. The trick is to come to a balanced understanding of what they are and what they aren't, what they are useful for and what they do not accomplish. This is not always easy.

BOUNDLESS SPACE, THE FIFTH JHANA

To attain this state, one simply continues to cultivate the fourth jhana and begins to not pay attention to the objects in the meditation space but gently to space itself. How big is reality? Tuning into the panoramic quality of attention itself when in the fourth jhana can be very helpful. This is quite a fine line, but it can definitely be done.

Forms then slip away like ghosts into thin air, and the mind turns to boundless space, the fifth jhana, as the object of concentration.

This jhana is often called "Infinite Space", as the next one is often called "Infinite Consciousness", but I prefer the word "boundless"

because it is much closer to the actual experience of these stages. People imagine that they might simultaneously perceive the whole of space, but what actually happens is that the perceptual boundaries drop away and a very unitive openness prevails. This open quality itself becomes the primary focus rather than what is unified in that openness. This aspect was already present in the 4th Jhana, but now it comes to the fore. The same is true of the next formless realm.

This is not necessarily as perfectly clean as it sounds, depending on how solidly one in this state, but it still quite spectacular. When this state is really cultivated, all or most images and sense of a body are gone, and almost all that is left is vastness. There is still thought and the illusion of a separate self, i.e. duality, but the mind is extremely quiet and the duality subtle. The equanimity from the 4th Jhana remains, as the formless realms use this state as their foundation. Sounds might still be noticeable depending on the depth of the state. Note, if one attains this state while meditating with the eyes open it may have a very different quality to it than if the eyes are closed.

From this state, the meditator has a few options. They can get stuck, which may be more prone to happening if they are incorrectly practicing The Formless Realms

non-dual formless practices such as dzogchen by fixating too much on the phrase "space-like awareness." They can also either go on to the next formless realm (boundless consciousness) or investigate this state and thus begin the progress of insight. If this last option is

chosen, special care and extreme precision must be given to each and every instant that the many sensations that make up the perception of space, silence or equanimity are perceived so as to see each of these experiences arise and pass completely in each instant, not satisfy, and not be self.

It may seem odd to think of the sensations of space arising and passing away each instant, but space is a conditioned aspect of relative reality, and is thus impermanent like all other aspects of experiential reality. This can be an important attainment, as it clarifies that awareness, that non-thing that is often described as space-like, is actually not even space, though it is not separate from space, as in the chapter called No-self vs. True Self.

There are few things quite as odd, profound, and possibly

disconcerting as investigating the first three formless realms and perceiving them strobe in and out of existence, but this is powerful practice and a very valuable and high attainment. Again, this state may be left and insight practices begun with the benefits of the residue of this state calming, opening and stabilizing the mind for a short time after it ends.

BOUNDLESS CONSCIOUSNESS, THE SIXTH JHANA

If the meditator wishes to go further into the formless realms, then they should continue to cultivate attention to boundless space and begin to notice that they are conscious of all of it, and thus space is filled with consciousness. As some point the mind will abandon boundless space and shift to perceiving boundless consciousness, the sixth jhana. This can feel outrageously unitive, as consciousness seems to fill the whole universe. Space becomes “luminous,” and this can be confused with descriptions of the fundamental luminosity of awareness and with non-duality, though this is definitely not the attainment of the understanding of those. Again, equanimity prevails. This state has a sense of presence to it that boundless space doesn't. It is also a great staging ground for exploration of the “psychic powers.”

From here the meditator has various options. They can get stuck, which can happen fairly easily if they are mistaking dzogchen or other non-dual formless practices for meditation on the concentration object of boundless consciousness, again due to misunderstanding or overemphasizing the phrase “space-like awareness.” They can also go on to cultivate the next formless realm (nothingness), or they can investigate boundless consciousness and then begin the progress of insight.

For this last option, extremely careful attention must be given to each moment that the sensations that make up the perceptions of

consciousness, vastness, or equanimity arise and pass away. Great precision must be given to the fact that these sensations do not satisfy and cannot be self or imply a separate self. Because of how

fundamentally disconcerting (unsatisfactory) it can be to have the three illusions shattered at this level of clarity and simplicity, this is not an easy practice but can be very powerful. It is actually much more likely that such insights into the true nature of the three first formless realms will arise spontaneously due to previous skillful insight practices.

Again, experiencing boundless consciousness strobing in and out of reality can be profoundly helpful in convincing us that even boundless consciousness that fills the vastness of space is not awareness, though awareness cannot be said to be separate from consciousness. What is observing boundless consciousness strobe in and out of reality? Now, there is a question, perhaps The Question.

NOTHINGNESS, THE SEVENTH JHANA

If the meditator wishes to attain to the next formless realm, that of nothingness, they simply cultivate the jhana of boundless consciousness and disenchant themselves with the vastness and luminosity of that state.

Eventually, the mind will abandon these and shift to the jhana of nothingness. To imagine this state, imagine space with all of the lights completely out, so that there is no vastness, and almost no sensations other than those of nothingness. It is almost as though attention is out of phase with nearly all phenomena except those that imply nothingness.

They are still there somewhere, but they are not being attended to.

This jhana is different from the previous two formless realms in that they are quite present to reality in some way and panoramic in

perspective, whereas nothingness is more turned away from phenomena and perhaps more focused in some way. There is, however, some very subtle thought and some extremely subtle sense of a separate self. Note well, nothingness is absolutely not emptiness, though it is empty, but this is not the attainment of this understanding. However, one can easily be convinced that this is emptiness due to the extreme profundity of it.

As before, this jhana can have different degrees of intensity to it.

Even when one is not strongly in it, there is a sense of being out of phase with reality, like being dissociated. Reality is there, but you have tuned it out on your radio. Note well, this is very different from just being “tuned out” in the colloquial sense.

While equanimity prevails, this state can be a bit scary at first, and this can cause some instability of this state. Now even consciousness and space are basically gone. However, there is still awareness of this state, indicating that there can be awareness that is not particularly consciousness or space. This really helps debunk the sense that awareness is consciousness or space or even a thing, that we are our body, etc. That said, it is not nothingness either. Nothingness may be perceived, whereas awareness may not.

From this state, the mind may get stuck, but this is not quite as likely as with the first two formless states, as this state is quite refined but not as breathtaking as the first two in some ways. The meditator may then try to move on to the next jhana, or may investigate this state. It may seem incredible that the sensations of nothingness itself could be observed to arise and pass, i.e. strobe in and out of reality, or that they could be known to not satisfy or not be self. However, this is definitely possible, if potentially quite disconcerting due to its extreme profundity and ability to really kick some sense into the mind about the truth of things. It also helps debunk the false idea that "The Void" or

"awareness" is nothingness. It is not even this. Remember, no sensation can observe another, so anything you can think of cannot be said to be

"awareness."

By simply paying close attention to every instant that nothingness or equanimity is perceived, and with precise attention to the exact arising and passing of each of these, that these transient moments do not satisfy, and that these neither can impute nor can be a separate self, the three 162

The Formless Realms

illusions can begin to be penetrated in the highest state in which this can be accomplished. As this is a particularly subtle business, the meditator may also leave the jhana and begin insight practice in the afterglow of this state as before. Strobing sensations of nothingness are more likely to arise during the progress of insight in the stage called High Equanimity for those with very strong concentration skills.

NEITHER PERCEPTION NOR YET NON-PERCEPTION,

THE EIGHTH JHANA

If the meditator wishes to attain the next jhana, they simply hang out in nothingness until they get bored with perception entirely and understand that even perception is somehow disconcerting. Thus, the mind will eventually shift on its own to the state with the perplexing but thoroughly appropriate title of "neither perception nor yet non-perception," hereafter "the eighth jhana" for the sake of brevity.

This state is largely incomprehensible, but it is absolutely not

emptiness. It is empty, but this is not the attainment of that understanding. The eighth jhana may very easily be confused as being emptiness, especially if it is attained through insight practices (remember that insight practices can simultaneously cultivate concentration and wisdom). There is no reasonable way to attempt to describe this state, save for that it is a mind state, and thus is not emptiness, as emptiness is not a mind state or anything else for that matter. I am tempted to say that one is simultaneously focused so narrowly that one notices nothing and yet so broadly that one doesn't notice even that, but such a description doesn't quite do this state justice. One way or the other, there is complete inattention to diversity. The eighth jhana is the highest of the states of concentration that can be attained, ignoring the attainment of the cessation of perception and feeling, see the Appendix.

It is not possible to investigate this state, as it is too

incomprehensible, or to move to a higher state. Thus, as this state ends, the meditator may return to lower states or turn to insight practice in the afterglow of this state. It should also be noted that, in contrast to the previous seven jhanas, the issue of "hard" or "soft" jhana that relates to how solidly one is in a state does not apply to the eighth jhana. You are either in it or you are not.

The eighth jhana may have a certain stability that nothingness doesn't due to the inability to make sense of it or go beyond it. Thus, the mind may move fairly quickly from boundless consciousness, through nothingness, and drop into the eighth jhana for a while, though the vaguest hint of attention to anything specific demolishes this state instantly. It is also possible to sort of drift up and down through the various formless realms, and shifting back down to lower jhanas after being up in higher jhanas such as this one can lend a great deal of intensity to them.

The eighth jhana can be sorted out from the attainment of

emptiness by a number of signs having to do with the way the entrance to the state presents itself (i.e. not being one of the Three Doors and thus not relating to the rapid and clear presentation of one of the Three Characteristics three or four times in quick succession), what came before this (i.e. not the stages of insight, see below) and the fact that there is still some subtle sense of a state and thus relative reality.

Just to drive this point home, an important feature of concentration practices is that they are not liberating in and of themselves. Even the highest of these states ends. The afterglow from them does not last that long, and regular reality might even seem like

a bit of an assault when it is gone. However, jhana-junkies still abound, and many have no idea that this is what they have become. I have a good friend who has been lost in the formless realms for over 20 years, attaining them again and again in his practice, rationalizing that he is doing dzogchen practice (a type of insight practice) when he is just sitting in the 4th-6th jhanas, rationalizing that the last two formless realms are emptiness, and rationalizing that he is enlightened. It is a true dharma tragedy.

Unfortunately, as another good friend of mine rightly pointed out, it is very hard to reach such people after a while. They get tangled in golden chains so beautiful that they have no idea they are even in prison, nor do they tend to take kindly to suggestions that this may be so, particularly if their identity has become bound up in their false notion that they are a realized being. Chronic jhana-junkies are fairly easy to identify, even though they often imagine that they are not. I have no problem with people becoming jhana-junkies, as we are all presumably able to take responsibilities for our choices in life. However, 164

when people don't realize that this is what they have become and pretend that what they are doing has something to do with insight practices, that's annoying and sad.

To try to clearly differentiate between concentration practice and insight practice, I will now give a detailed description of the stages of insight so that the contrast will be as clear as possible. Pay careful attention to how different these descriptions are from those of the pure concentration states.

24.THE PROGRESS OF INSIGHT

The progress of insight is a set of stages that diligent meditators pass through on the path of insight. Some of the "content based" or psychological insights into ourselves can be interesting and helpful, but when I say "insight," these stages are what I am talking about. Just so that you have seen the whole list of the names of these stages, the formal names of stages of insight in order are:

1. Mind and Body
2. Cause and Effect

The pre-vipassana stages

1st jhana

3. The Three Characteristics
4. The Arising and Passing Away

2nd jhana

5. Dissolution

6. Fear
7. Misery
The Dark Night
3rd jhana
8. Disgust
(dukkha ñanas)
9. Desire for Deliverance
10. Re-observation
11. Equanimity
4th jhana
12. Conformity
13. Change of Lineage
14. Path
15. Fruition
Nirvana (one of two meanings)
16. Review

I will give detailed descriptions of them shortly.

I will refer to these stages by their shortened titles, their numbers and occasionally short-hand slang. These are formally known as

"Knowledge of" and then the stage, e.g. "Knowledge of Mind and Body," but I will just use the part after the "of." They are also called

"ñanas," which means "knowledges", usually with a number, as in "the First Ñana." Notice that I use the word stage rather than state. These are stages of heightened perception into the truth of things, opportunities to see directly how things actually are, but they are not seemingly stable states as with concentration practice. The jhanaic groupings refer to vipassana jhanas, which will be covered in more depth later, but they borrow their perspectives and certain fundamental aspects from their

samatha jhana equivalents. In other ways they may diverge widely from the experience of pure samatha jhanas.

One of the most profound things about these stages is that they are strangely predictable regardless of the practitioner or the insight tradition. Texts two thousand years old describe the stages just the way people go through them today, though there will be some individual variation on some of the particulars today as then. The Christian maps, the Sufi maps, the Buddhist maps of the Tibetans and the Theravada, and the maps of the Khabbalists and Hindus are all remarkably consistent in their fundamentals. I chanced into these classic experiences before I had any training in meditation, and I have met a large number of people who have done likewise. These maps, Buddhist or otherwise, are talking about something inherent in how our minds progress in fundamental wisdom that has little to do with

any tradition and lots to do with the mysteries of the human mind and body. These stages are not Buddhist but universal, and Buddhism is merely one of the traditions that describes them, albeit unusually well.

The progress of insight is discussed in a number of good books, such as Jack Kornfield's A Path with Heart in the section called Dissolving the Self, which I highly recomment. A very extensive, thorough, accessible and highly recommended treatment of it is given in Mahasi Sayadaw's works The Progress of Insight and Practical Insight Meditation (on BPS out of Sri Lanka), a partially castrated version of which appears in Jack Kornfield's Living Dharma. It should be noted here that Practical Insight Meditation is my favorite dharma book of all time with no close competitors. If you can ever lay your hands on a copy, do so! Even the section of it that appears in Living Dharma is much better than having access to none of it at all.

Sayadaw U Pandita's In This Very Life also covers this territory, and is a bit of a must have for those who like lists and straight-up Theravada, but he leaves out a lot of juicy details. The Vis

uddhimagga , a 5th

Century text by Buddhaghosa, also does a nice treatment of these stages, and contains some interesting and hard to find information. It focuses largely on the emotional side-effects and thus misses many useful points.

Another good but brief map appears in Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's Dharma Paths. You could also check out Bhante

Gunaratana's The Path of Serenity and Insight if you would like to know the dogma well. It is a thorough and scholarly work.

Matthew Flickstein's Swallowing the River Ganges is a light

treatment of basic Buddhist concepts and contains a very superficial treatment of the stages of insight. It is kind of like what would happen if you condensed a medical school textbook down to a 5th grade science text. It focuses almost entirely on the emotional side effects and thus misses a huge amount that is worthy of discussion, but it comes from a good place and is harmless enough. It doesn't add anything to the above sources but is easy to read.

There are many less accessible maps of insight as well. The Tibetan Book of the Dead

, Li

beration Through Hearing in the Bardo requires

some prior familiarity with this territory to sort out the wild symbolic imagery. A 12th Century Sufi map is given in Journey to the

Lord of Power by Ibn 'Arabi, but again the medieval symbolism is somewhat hard to untangle unless you are already personally familiar with these stages. It also provides a very interesting if quite cryptic description of the higher stages of realization. St. John of the Cross' The Dark Night of The

Soul does a good job of dealing with the most difficult of the insight stages. His map is called The Ladder of Love. Unfortunately, the translation of the medieval Spanish and thickness of complex Catholic dogma make it a fairly inaccessible.

I strongly recommend that you consult some of these other sources, particularly the first five mentioned. While I consider the treatment of the stages of insight that follows shortly to be by far the most comprehensive and practical explanation of the stages of insight ever written, and I mean that honestly, there are still lots of great points made in those books, and you should check them out. There is a huge amount of valuable information left out in all of these sources, perhaps due to the Mushroom Factor, but perhaps due to some of the

difficulties in describing all the little nuances of the subject in all its possible variations. Thus, working with a teacher who has personal mastery of these stages (regardless of what they call them) is an extremely good idea most of the time.

The model terminology I am using is from the ancient

commentaries on the Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition. This

model is used mostly in Burma but is also used to some degree in the other Theravada traditions. Zen is quite aware of these stages, as all Zen Masters had to go through them and continue to do so, but they tend not to name them or talk about them, as is their typical style. This can be helpful, as people can get all obsessed with these maps, turning them into a new form of useless content and a source of imprisoning identification and competition. This is the ugly shadow side of goal-oriented or map-based practice, but it often (though not always) may be overcome with honest awareness of this fact.

Luckily, if the meditator really is into insight territory, continued correct practice has a way of unsticking them given time. Also, when the proverbial stuff is hitting the fan, having a map around can really help the meditator not make too many of the common and tempting

mistakes of that stage, as well as provide the meditator with faith that that they are on the right track when they hit the hard or weird stages.

These stages can significantly color or skew a meditator's view of their life until they master them, and it can be very helpful to

remember this when trying to navigate this territory and keep one's job and relationships functioning. Those who do not have the benefit of the maps in these situations or who choose to ignore them are much more easily blindsided by the psychological extremes and challenges which may sometimes accompany stages such as The Arising and Passing Away and those of The Dark Night.

While many people don't want to know the maps for various

reasons (such as their own unexamined insecurities), I suspect that many more people could get a lot farther in their practice if they did know them. At their very least, the maps clearly demonstrate that there is vastly more to all this than just philosophy or psychology. They also clearly and unambiguously point to how the game is played step by step and stage by stage, what one is looking for and more importantly why, and give guidelines for how to avoid screwing up along the way. Why people wouldn't want to know these things is completely beyond me.

They fill in the juicy details of the seemingly vast gap from doing some seemingly boring and simple practice to getting enlightened.

Further, providing all of this extremely precise information on exactly what to do puts the responsibility for progress or a lack thereof clearly 169

on the meditator (e.g. you), which is exactly where it should be. If after reading this book you don't put this extremely powerful information into practice, the fault is your own.

There is considerable evidence that the lack of this information in insight traditions that don't use the maps has been one of the primary obstacles to progress. On the other hand, the maps can sometimes cause furious competition and arrogance in the traditions that do use them, as well as harmful fixation on purely future-oriented goals. Please, do your very best to avoid these sorts of problems.

The more intense, consistent and precise the practice, the easier it is to see how the maps apply. The more energy, focus and consistency is put into practice, the more dramatic and even outrageous these stages can be. If these stages unfold over long periods of time and gently, it can be more difficult to see the progression through them, though it does happen regardless. Certain emphases in practice, such as Mahasi Sayadaw style "noting" practice, particularly on intensive retreats, seem to produce a clearer appreciation of the maps, and some individuals will have an easier time seeing how these maps apply than others will.

Each stage is marked by very specific increases in our perceptual abilities. The basic areas we can improve in are clarity, precision, speed, consistency, inclusiveness and acceptance. It is these

improvements in our perceptual abilities that are the hallmarks of each stage and the gold standard by which they are defined and known. Each stage also tends to bring up mental and physical raptures (unusual manifestations). These are fairly predictable at each stage and sometimes very unique to each stage. They are secondary to the increase in perceptual thresholds of ways by which we may judge whether or not we are in a particular stage.

Each stage also tends to bring up specific aspects of our emotional and psychological makeup. These are also strangely predictable, but these are not as reliable for determining which stage is occurring. They are suggestible, ordinary, and will show more variation from person to person. However, when used in conjunction with the changes in perceptual threshold and the raptures, they can help us get a clearer sense of which stage has been attained. Further, these stages occur in a very predictable order, and so looking for a pattern of stages leading one to the next can help us get a sense of what is going on. Thus, when 170

reading my descriptions of these stages, pay attention to these separate aspects: the shift in perceptual threshold, the physical and mental raptures, the emotional and psychological tendencies, and the overall pattern of how that stage fits with the rest.

So, the meditator sits down (or lies down, stands, etc.) and begins to try to experience each and every sensation clearly as it is. When the meditator gains enough concentration to steady the mind on the object of meditation, something called “access concentration,” they may enter the first jhana, now called the “first vipassana jhana,” which is in some ways the same for both concentration practice and insight practice at the beginning. However, as they have been practicing insight meditation, they are not trying to solidify this state, but are trying to penetrate the three illusions by understanding the Three Characteristics.

They have been trying to sort out with mindfulness what is body and what is mind and when each is and isn’t there. They have been trying to be clear about the actual sensations that make up their world just as they are. They have been trying to directly understand the Three

Characteristics moment to moment in whatever sensations arise, be it in a restricted area of space, such as the area of the sensations of breathing, a moving area of space (e.g. body-scanning practices), in the whole of their world as is done in choiceless awareness practices, using some other technique or object, or just by being alive and paying attention.

Thus, this first stage has a different quality to it from that of

concentration practice, and they attain to direct and clear perception of the first knowledge of...

1. MIND AND BODY

There is this sudden shift, and mental phenomena shift out away from the illusory sense of “the watcher” and are just out there in the world with the sensations of the other five sense doors. This is an important insight, as it shows us clearly and directly that we are not

“our” mind or “our” body. It is also a really nice, clear and unitive-feeling state (it really is still more state-like than stage-like), and people can try to hold on to it just as with the first jhana and get stuck. Reality can seem just a bit more brilliant the first time one chances into Mind and Body. We may feel more alive and connected to the world.

With the sensate experience of both mental and physical

phenomena being clearly observable, the relationships and interactions between the two begin to become obvious. What is meant by “the dualistic split” is very obvious during this first stage.

Somewhere around the first stage, either just before it or shortly after it, there may arise odd jaw pains on one side, throat tensions, and some other such unpleasant physical occurrences. Regardless, it soon becomes easy to see that each sensation is followed by the crude mental impression of it, and that intentions precede actions and thoughts (see the discussion of impermanence in Part I, The Three Characteristics).

Thus, we come to...

2. CAUSE AND EFFECT

In this stage, the relationships between mental and physical phenomena become very clear and sometimes ratchet-like. The joy and wonder of Mind and Body have left, and now the interactions between the mind and body become somewhat mechanical seeming. Motions such as walking or the breath may begin to get jerky, as there is the intention and the motion, the sensation and the mental impression of it, the cause and the effect, all occurring in a way which can seem sort of tight and robot-like. You note, the breath moves just a bit. You stop noting, the breath stops. You note quickly, the breath jerks quickly. You note slowly, the breath follows. Some will stop noting quickly or stop noting at all, thinking that they are messing up the breath. The advice here is as before: note quickly, and don’t worry about what the breath does.

Remember how I recommended trying to experience one to ten

sensations per second consistently, noting which were mental and which were physical? At this stage, the meditator is finally able to do

this with a fair degree of skill, confidence and consistency. Those with stronger concentration tendencies or a bent towards such things may notice thoughts and perhaps even visions of insight into cause and effect on a macroscopic scale, where past action or circumstances lead to various consequences, some event lead to some rebirth, some previous life lead to something today, and in general may get a sense that they are able to intuit aspects of the workings of karma in a way they did not before. As the meditator becomes more clear about the beginnings and endings of 172

each of these, about the irritation caused by this jerkiness and about the fact that all of this seems to be happening fairly on its own, they come to directly perceive for themselves...

3. THE THREE CHARACTERISTICS

The Three Characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and egolessness or no-self become predominant, which is good, as these are the fundamental basis for insight. Here it begins to become quite clear that these intentions and actions, sensations and the knowledge of them, and all of the constituents of this experience are quickly arising and passing, somewhat jarring, and not particularly in our control or us.

Further, as these sensations are all observed, including the crude mental impression that follows them (“consciousness”), the whole of the mind and body process is not a separate self. It is merely a part of the interdependent world.

These characteristics become clearer and clearer, as well as faster and faster, as the meditator diligently pays careful attention to exactly what is happening at each moment. For those doing noting practice, somewhere around here your speed and precision may begin to get so fast that you cannot note every sensation you experience. Move to more general noting, mono-syllabic noting (such as “beep” for each sensation experienced regardless of what it was), or drop the noting entirely and stay with noticing bare sensation come and go. At this stage, practice begins to really take off despite the fact that this stage tends to be fairly unpleasant.

This unpleasantness tends to be mostly physical, though this stage can also cause numerous dark feelings and a sense of wanting to renounce the world and practice. Occasionally, the early part of this stage can cause people to feel vulnerable, raw, and irritable to a small or large degree in the ways that a migraine headache or a bad case of PMS

can. I have occasionally been laid out on a couch for hours by this aspect of this stage, holding my head and just wishing that these early stages didn’t sometimes involve so much pain and anguish.

There may be odd bodily twistings, obsession with posture, and painful tensions or strange other sensations, particularly in the back, neck, jaw and shoulders. These tensions may persist when not meditating and be quite irritating and even debilitating. The rhomboid

and trapezius muscles are the most common offenders. It is common to try to sit with good posture and then find one's body twisting into some odd and painful position. You straighten out, and soon enough it does it again. That's a very Three Characteristics sort of pattern. People sometimes describe these feelings as some powerful energy that is blocked and seems wants to get out or move through.

Feelings of heat and sensations like those of a fever may sometimes accompany this stage. One's neck and back may become very stiff, either on one side or both sides. The right and left sides of one's body may feel quite different from each other sometimes. The easiest way to get these unpleasant physical manifestations to go away is to keep investigating the Three Characteristics, either of them or of whatever primary object you have chosen. These are common early retreat experiences, particularly in the first few days.

Fighting them or trying other methods (backrubs, etc.) seems to either help only a little, work only temporarily, or sometimes make them even worse, though sometimes hatha yoga and related practices done with a high degree of awareness can be helpful. This is a common time for people to go to health practitioners of various kinds, from orthopedists and dentists to chiropractors and body workers. For example, I had a wisdom tooth removed during one pass through this stage because I thought it was throwing my jaw out of alignment, and perhaps it was, but this was clearly exacerbated by this stage of practice.

Even if these unpleasant physical manifestations do slack off for a bit, they are likely to keep coming back until one's insight is sufficient to progress beyond this part of this stage. Thus, should one find such things interfering with one's life, I recommend continued precise and accepting practice. This is a phase of practice when strong effort and very quick investigation really pay off.

Certain traditions may look at such physical manifestations as

"energy imbalances" or in some other negative light, and I can see where they are coming from, but I find those perspectives limiting.

Rather, I see this stage in its broader context as just one more phase of practice. Others may invent very strange stories to explain these experiences. A friend of mine ran into this ñana on retreat, found it very unpleasant, stopped practicing and began to spin out all sorts of fantastic

stories in her head about how the poor fellow sitting next to her was very angry and how it was making her tense. This didn't help whatsoever, and she got stuck there. I have learned to welcome these odd manifestations as clearly recognizable markers of progress on the path.

They are clear objects for practice and reassure me that I am on the right track. Unfortunately, this is a hard lesson to teach others. True, these manifestations can suck, but being able to appreciate what is happening in the face of the difficult stages is important, and becomes much more important later on.

As the mind gains speed at really seeing each of the sensations of the mind and body come and go, and the jerkiness from cause and effect can get quite rapid and pronounced. These physical movements and spasms seem to help break up the physical tension that may sometimes accompany this stage, and are a sign of progress.

4. THE ARISING AND PASSING AWAY

This is also the beginning of the second vipassana jhana. As in the second samatha jhana, the applied and sustained effort or attention begin to drop away, and meditation can seem to take on a life of its own.

In the early part of this stage, the meditator's mind speeds up more and more quickly, and reality begins to be perceived as particles or fine vibrations of mind and matter, each arising and vanishing utterly at tremendous speed. The traditional texts actually call this stage the beginning of insight practices, as from this point on there is a much more direct and non-conceptual understanding of the Three

Characteristics.

This stage is marked by dramatically increased perceptual abilities when compared with the previous stages. For example, one might be able to hone one's awareness to laser-like precision on the tip of one's little finger and seemingly be able to perceive the beginning and ending of every single sensation that made up that finger. Spontaneous physical movements and strange jerky breathing patterns that showed up in Cause and Effect and became more pronounced in the Three

Characteristics may speed up significantly. This stage explains where many practices such as Tibetan inner fire practices of the Yogic breath of fire come from. It can also reveal the source material that inspired 175

teachings such as those about chakras and energy channels. Many descriptions of Kundalini awakening are talking about this stage.

Reality is perceived directly with great clarity, and great bliss,

rapture, equanimity, mindfulness, concentration, and other positive qualities arise. Practice is extremely profound and sustainable, and there may be no pain even after hours of sitting. Unfortunately, the positive qualities that have arisen can easily become what are called the "Ten Corruptions of Insight" if the true nature of the individual sensations by which they are known are not understood as well, and until this happens a meditator can easily get stuck in the immature part of this stage.

The Ten Corruptions of Insight are: illumination, knowledge, rapturous happiness, tranquility, bliss, resolute confidence, exertion, assurance, equanimity and attachment. To quote the great meditation master Sayadaw U Pandita, from his great but very hard-to-find book, On the Path to Freedom, "As for the practicing yogi, he will at once recognize the above as imperfections of insight not representing dhamma breakthrough and are only to be noted off, remembering the teacher's advice as to what is path and not path. Being disabled by the ten imperfections, he would not be capable of observing the triple characteristics in their true nature; but once freed from imperfections, he is able to do so." In short, they may feel that they are now a very mighty meditator and that they should try to hold on to this forever, i.e.

they stop actually doing insight practices and instead solidify these qualities as concentration practice objects. Thus, the advice given about deconstructing and investigating the positive factors of the samatha jhanas, particularly the second one, is also very helpful when trying to stay on the narrow path of the progress of insight.

Visions, unusual sensory abilities (such as seeing nearby things through one's closed eyelids), out of body experiences, and especially bright lights tend to arise to the meditator, sometimes first as jewel-tone sparkles and then as a bright white light ("I have seen the light!"). The technical meditator may easily sit for hours dissecting their reality into extremely fine and fast sensations and vibrations, perhaps even up to 40

per second or even more, with an extremely high level of precision and consistency. (Where the absurd and disheartening rumors of billions of mind moments per second come from is beyond me). Fine vibrations 176

The Progress of Insight

may spread over the body, revealing interference patterns between experiences, enabling one to know directly that when one thing is experienced, in that instant, something else is not.

It is very easy to confuse this stage with descriptions of stage 11.

Equanimity, especially as the stage before it, 10. Re-observation, has some distinct similarities to stage 3. The Three Characteristics. A

brief discussion of the fractal nature of things that describes this will follow in the chapter called The Vipassana Jhanas. The big difference is that this stage is ruled by quick cycles, rapidly changing frequencies of vibrations, odd physical movements, strange breathing patterns, heady raptures, a decreased need for sleep, strong bliss, and a general sense of riding on a spiritual roller coaster with no breaks. The higher stages (10 and 11) do not have those qualities.

As to the cycles, they tend to proceed as follows, with this description assuming that you are using the breath as object. The mind kicks in, follows faster and faster vibrations, things really engage and speed up, perhaps accompanied by more pronounced shaking or

strange breathing patterns increasing in speed, and then finally half way down an out-breath there is a shift, things drop down slowly, it takes work to stay with things as they slow down, and then things bottom out.

The breath may stop entirely for a while. Then things come back up with the breath, attention tends to flag, things relax, and then the cycle begins again with things speeding up, etc. These breathing cycles may happen quite on their own and may even be difficult to stop when we are deeply into this stage. Those using visualizations as object, may notice that the objects begin to spin with the phase of the breath, or move in ways that they seem to have a life of their own, albeit a two dimensional one, as compared to the three dimensional visions that may arise later.

As this stage deepens and matures, meditators let go of even the high levels of clarity and the other strong factors of meditation, perceive even these to arise and pass as just vibrations, not satisfy, and not be self.

They may plunge down into the very depths of the mind as though plunging deep underwater to where they can perceive individual frames of reality arise and pass with breathtaking clarity as though in slow 177

motion. It can even feel as if we have been submerged in thick syrup and partially sedated with some strong, opiate-like drug.

At the bottom of these depths, however they present themselves, individual moments may sometimes have a frozen quality to them, as if sensations were stopping completely in the middle of their manifestation for just an instant, and this way of experiencing reality is unique to this stage. Somewhere in here is the entrance to the third vipassana jhana in U Pandita's model, though there is some controversy about exactly which insights line up with which vipassana jhanas from here on out. I prefer to think of the Arising and Passing Away being purely second vipassana jhana. I will discuss these

controversies in the following chapter.

They may be able to meditate with profound clarity even when asleep, and the need for sleep may be greatly reduced. Wild "kundalini"

phenomena are very common at this point, including powerful physical shaking and releases, explosions of consciousness like a fireworks display or a tornado, visions, and especially vortexes of powerful fine

"electrical" vibrations blasting down one's spinal column and/or between one's ears. These vortexes can be very loud. These sorts of experiences can occur quite unexpectedly and even off the cushion, such as in lucid dreams. They may be followed by various mixtures of wonder,

excitement, bliss, extraordinary joy, and sometimes disorientation. It is not uncommon for those in the height of the rapture of this stage to associate some of these occurrences with those of an extended orgasm.

None of these things are a problem unless their true nature is not understood or unless they happen when one is doing something like driving a car down an interstate at 75 miles per hour (a story for another time).

Strong sensual or sexual feelings and dreams are common at this stage, and these may have a non-discriminating quality that those attached to their notion of themselves as being something other than partially bisexual may find disturbing. Further, if you have unresolved issues around sexuality, which we basically all have, you may encounter aspects of them during this stage. This stage, its afterglow, and the almost withdrawal-like crash that can follow seem to increase the temptation to indulge in all manner of hedonistic delights, particularly 178

substances and sex. As the bliss wears off, we may find ourselves feeling very hungry or lustful, craving chocolate, wanting to go out and party, or something like that. If we have addictions that we have been fighting, some extra vigilance near the end of this stage might be helpful.

This stage also tends to give people more of an extroverted, zealous or visionary quality, and they may have all sorts of energy to pour into somewhat idealistic or grand projects and schemes. At the far extreme of what can happen, this stage can imbue one with the powerful charisma of the radical religious leader.

Finally, at nearly the peak of the possible resolution of the mind, they cross something called "The Arising and Passing Event" (A&P

Event) or "Deep Insight into the Arising and Passing Away." This

event marks a profound shift in the meditator's practice, and from then on they will be somewhat changed by what they have seen, with this being the Point of No Return that I mentioned in the Foreword and Warning.

The intensity of this event can vary, though it tends to be quite clear and memorable, particularly the first time one crosses it during that cycle.

It should also be noted that some people will have a big and obvious buildup to such experiences and for others they will suddenly just show up completely without warning, sometimes spontaneously and even without formal meditation training, as happened to me at around age 15. I have a number of friends who ran into these things without formal training and in daily life, others who ran into them when doing hallucinogens including mescaline and LSD, others during yoga practice, others while around powerful spiritual figures, including one who had it happen while hanging out with a Christian faith healer and a few who were hanging out with various gurus.

Whatever context the first A&P Event happens in, that context will tend to hold a special place in that person's heart from then on. For me it happened on my own, by my own meditation efforts and without a tradition, and so I have always associated my own practice with progress.

My friend who had it happen with the Christian faith healer became the most hardcore Christian you could find. Another friend who had it happen while on mescaline has since held a special place in her heart for shamanism. Those who had it happen with gurus tended to follow those gurus for some period of time, associating it with the gurus 179

The Progress of Insight

presence. Some others who had it happen in an apparently random context usually had no idea what it was or what it had done to them, but most have realized that something was different and nearly all remember it with an uncanny clarity as somehow standing out from ordinary experiences.

Once one has attained this event, it is fairly likely that one will be able to attain the first stage of awakening sooner or later if one can navigate the Dark Night skillfully (read: simply keep practicing). Thus, a good first goal in insight meditation is to cross the A&P Event at one's earliest possible convenience, with caveats given later in the section on the Dark Night.

The A&P Event can happen in three basic ways corresponding to the Three Characteristics, just as can the entrance to insight stage 15.

Fruition, and the two are easily confused for this and other reasons.

There is great variation in the specifics of what we are seeing and feeling when we cross this profound and intense event, but certain aspects of these events will be common to all practitioners. This event tends to manifest in a way that can mirror the Three Doors (described in a few chapters) at about the middle of the out breath, leading to an unknowing event, followed by a few exceedingly clearer and more distinct moments imparting some deep understanding of the Three Characteristics before a second unknowing event at the end of the breath. It is not uncommon for the A&P event to occur during a particularly lucid dream or at least in the middle of the night.

Now, it should be noted here that it is unlikely in these extreme moments for the sense of the breath to be particularly clear, but this is how things happen regardless. In these moments, most, but not all, of their sensate universe strobes in and out of reality, arises and passes.

The subtle background and sense of an observer still seems to stay stable. In contrast to this, the entrance to stage 15. Fruition is through one of the Three Doors, involves the complete sensate universe (background, time, space and all), happens at the end of the out breath, and does not involve two closely related unknowing events. (The usefulness of this information may become apparent later on.) Those who have crossed the A&P Event have stood on the ragged edge of reality and the mind for just an instant, and they know that 180

awakening is possible. They will have great faith, may want to tell everyone to practice, and are generally evangelical for a while. They will have an increased ability to understand the teachings due to their direct and non-conceptual experience of the Three Characteristics.

Philosophy that deals with the fundamental paradoxes of duality will be less problematic for them in some way, and they may find this fascinating for a time. Those with a strong philosophical bent will find that they can now philosophize rings around those who have not attained to this stage of insight.

They may also incorrectly think that they are enlightened, as what they have seen was completely spectacular and profound. In fact, this is strangely common for some period of time, and thus may stop

practicing when they have actually only really begun.

This is a common time for people to write inspired dharma books, poetry, spiritual songs, and that sort of thing. This is also the stage when people are more likely to join monasteries or go on great spiritual quests. It is also worth noting that this stage can look an awful lot like a manic episode as defined in the DSM-IV (the current diagnostic manual of psychiatry). The rapture and intensity of this

stage can be basically off the scale, the absolute peak on the path of insight, but it doesn't last.

Soon the meditator will learn what is meant by the phrase, "Better not to begin. Once begin, better to finish!" as they are now too far into this to ever really go back. Until they complete this progress of insight, they are "on the ride" and may begin to feel that the dharma is now doing them rather than the other way around, as they will progress inevitably and relatively quickly, usually within days, into stages 5-10, which as you will shortly see, are not always a party. The rapture and all the bells and whistles die down quickly, and the meditator may even be left raw as if hung over after a night of wild partying. The clarity fades somewhat, and the endings of objects becomes predominant as they progress to knowledge of...

5. DISSOLUTION, ENTRANCE TO THE DARK NIGHT

Thus begins what are called the "Knowledges of Suffering" or "The Dark Night of the Soul" (to use St. John of the Cross' terminology). I consider this the entrance to the third vipassana jhana, though U

Pandita considers this the entrance to the fourth vipassana jhana. I'll give 181

The Progress of Insight

my arguments for this later in the chapter that deals more directly with the vipassana jhanas.

The Dark Night spans stages 5 through 10 in this map, namely Dissolution, Fear, Misery, Disgust, Desire for Deliverance, and Re-observation. Stages 5 through 9 tend to "come as a package," with one leading fairly quickly and naturally to the others. Stage 10, Re-observation, tends to stand out as its own distinct and often formidable entity. It should be noted that some pass through the Dark Night quickly and some slowly. Some barely notice it, and for some it is a huge deal, regardless of the speed at which one moves through these stages. Some may get run over by it on one retreat, fall back, and then pass through it with no great difficulties some time later. Others may struggle for years to learn its lessons.

I am going to describe the Dark Night largely in extreme terms, but realize that this is just to give a heads up to what is possible, not what is necessary or guaranteed. As before, on retreat these things are likely to be more intense and clear, though those on retreat who are able to keep practicing are likely to make much faster progress as well. On the other hand, practice in "daily life" can be powerful and sometimes very speedy. These things are strangely unpredictable. Enough disclaimers!

Once someone has crossed the Arising and Passing Event, one will enter the Dark Night regardless of whether one wants to or not. It

doesn't matter if you practice from this point on; once you cross the A&P you are in the Dark Night to some degree (i.e. are a Dark Night Yogi) until you figure out how to get through it, and if you do get through it without getting to the first stage of enlightenment, you will have to go through it again and again until you do. I mean this in the most absolute terms.

The Dark Night typically begins with just about all of the profound clarity, mindfulness, concentration, focus, equanimity and bliss of the previous stage dropping away. So also ends the cause-and-effect-like phenomena of the breath or walking shaking or jerking up and down in a way related to attention and noting, as well as all of the fine vibrations and vortex-like raptures. Early on, the frequency of vibrations disconnects from the cycle of the breath, remaining largely stable at 182

whatever frequency is going on at that stage once they can be perceived again (in late Dissolution or Fear).

Whereas one might have felt that one's attention had finally attained the one-pointed focus that is so highly valued in most ideals of meditation during the Arising and Passing Away, during the Dark Night one will have to deal with the fact that one's attention is actually quite wide and its contents unstable. Further, the center of one's attention becomes the very least clear area of experience, and the periphery becomes predominant. This is normal and even expected by those who know this territory. However, most meditators are not expecting this at all and so get blindsided and wage a futile battle to make their attention do something that, in this part of the path, it simply won't do.

If one has ever been meditating in a place with lots of mosquitoes buzzing in one's ears in a way that made it very hard to concentrate on the primary object, one can get a sense of what one's attention will be like in the Dark Night. Rather than fighting against this and ignoring the metaphorical mosquitoes, one should try to understand what it feels like to have one's attention be however it is. Just like listening to discordant, chromatic jazz with lots of jarring harmonies and instruments playing more at odds with each other than together takes some getting used to, the quality of attention in the Dark Night is an acquired taste, and the sensations that arise tend to be very rich, complex, broad and unsettling.

Those that fixate on staying one-pointed will suffer more than those who learn to stay with what is going on regardless of whether or not it feels like "good meditation."

In that same vein, those who are using some other object as a focus will notice the same phenomena of the width of attention being

wider and the basic sense that attention seems to sort of be out of phase with phenomena. Those doing visualizations may notice that they see a black spot in the center of their attention with some sort of patterns or visions around the edge of it spreading wider and wider out into the periphery.

Those using a mantra may feel that the mantra is out of phase with attention, wide and complex and yet hard to stay with, and may acquire more complex harmonics and harmonies if it is in any way musical, like listening to a large, ghost chorus that is off to the sides of you, whereas before the mantra may have felt centered in the stereo field of attention.

There will be individual variation in some aspects of these things, depending on object, focus, ability, and each person's particular proclivities, but some basic aspects will be universal, and I will talk more about these aspects in the later chapter on the Vipassana Jhanas.

There are two basic patterns of vibrations in the Dark Night, and they are actually the Dark Night's defining characteristics. One may get overwhelmed by the descriptions of emotional difficulties, but keep these patterns in mind and try to stay on that level. One is fairly slow, somewhat regular and chunky, at perhaps 5-7 Hz, with not much else going on. It's an early Dark Night thing and it tends to feel like a shamanic drum beat. The later pattern is fairly fast, perhaps 10-18+ Hz, a bit more irregular, and has faster and slower harmonics in the background and around the periphery of our attention. It tends to make us feel very buzzy and edgy. The fact that the background is beginning to shake is a good sign of progress, as this needs to happen for the cycle to be completed. On the other hand, it is exactly the fact that the background has begun to shake and crumble that can cause people to freak out.

Things were all fun and games when the primary object was shaking, but when the sense of the observer starts to shake, that can be creepy.

Simply pay careful attention to exactly what is happening, staying with each pulse of each vibration as clearly as you can, trying to see each from its beginning to its end. Chances are you will be just fine.

There are two basic things that happen during the Dark Night, one emotional, the other perceptual. Our dark stuff tends to come bubbling up to the surface with a volume and intensity that we may never have known before. Remembering what is good in our life can be difficult in the face of this, and our reactivity in the face of our dark stuff can cause us staggering amounts of needless suffering. On top of this, we also begin to directly experience the fundamental

suffering of duality, a suffering that has always been with us but which we have never known with this level of intensity or ever clearly understood. We face a profound and fundamental crisis of identity as our insight into the Three Characteristics begins to demolish part of the basic illusion of there being a separate or permanent us. This suffering is a kind of 184

suffering that has nothing to do with what happens in our life and everything to do with a basic misunderstanding of all of it.

Dealing with either of these two issues, i.e. our dark stuff and our fundamental crisis of identity, would be a difficult undertaking, but trying to deal with them both at the same time is at least twice as difficult and can sometimes be overwhelming. It goes without saying that we tend not to be at our best when we are overwhelmed in this way.

The knee-jerk response often is to try to make our minds and our world change so as to try to stop the suffering we experience. However, when we are deeply into the Dark Night, we could be living in paradise and not be able to appreciate this at all, and so this solution is guaranteed to fail. Thus, my strong advice is to work on finishing up this cycle of insight and then work on your stuff from a place of insight and balance, rather than trying to do it in the reactive and disorienting stages of the Dark Night! I cannot make this point strongly enough.

As a close friend of mine with a ton of experience in insight practices and a gift for precise language and teaching so aptly put it,

"The Dark Night can really fuck up your life." However, I will give you two hard-won pieces of advice that I have found have made the difference in the face of these stages. First, make the time to do basic insight practices. Do your very best to get sufficient insight into the Three Characteristics so as to get past this stage! Make time for retreats or alone time and don't get stuck in the Dark Night. You and everyone around you will be happy that you did so.

The second piece of advice is to have a "no-bleedthrough" policy when you suspect you are in the Dark Night. Simply refuse to let your negativity bleed out onto everyone and everything around you. Failure to do so can be disastrous, as your profound lack of perspective, fixation on negativity and the suffering from your fundamental crisis of identity can easily get projected out onto things and people that simply did not cause that suffering! No one appreciates this at all and it does no good whatsoever.

Combining these two pieces of important advice, resolve thus, "I have recently crossed the A&P Event and I know this by the many obvious signs of that stage. Now I am feeling strangely reactive and

negative about things that I ordinarily am able to handle with more

balance and clarity, and I know that a good part of this is due to the inevitable Dark Night that follows the A&P. I realize that I am in a less than ideal position to skillfully deal with the personal issues that are driving me crazy, as I am likely to project the suffering from the illusion of duality and the odd side effects of the Dark Night onto these issues.

"I have been warned that this is an extremely bad idea from those who have successfully navigated in this territory, and I have faith that they know what they are talking about. Even if these issues are real and valid, I am likely to blow them way out of proportion and not be able to bring balance and kindness to them. By contracting into my own reactive darkness and confusion, I could easily hurt others and myself.

Thus, I resolve to keep my darkness to myself, tell only those who are skilled in navigating in dark territory, or at least share it with others in a way that does not project it out on my world and them, and so will spare those around me needless suffering which they do not deserve. In short, I will use the meditation map theory to keep the reins on my dark stuff and to deal with it in ways that are known to help rather than harm.

"I will make time for insight practices and retreats during which time I will simply see the true nature of the sensations of whatever arises, however horrible or compelling, and not indulge in the content of my stuff for one skinny instant if this is within the limits of my strength and power. In this way, I will be able to navigate this territory skillfully and not damage my daily life. Should I fail, I will actively seek help from those who are skilled in helping people keep a healthy perspective in the face of dark issues until such time as I can face the Dark Night as recommended.

"When I have attained to the first stage of awakening, that will be a great time to see how much of my negativity was really valid and how much was just due to my own lack of clarity and the side effects of the Dark Night. From that place of clarity, I will be much more likely to fix those things in my life that really need fixing and attention and be able to dismiss easily those paper tigers that I have created for myself. By not trying to take on all of this at once, that is, by gaining deep insights before tackling the personal issues, I am more likely to lead the happy and wise life I wish for myself. I will attain to both liberating insights and

insights into my issues, and this will be of great benefit to myself

and all beings."

One of the primary reasons that I wrote this book was to write this important resolution. I have suffered needlessly and sometimes profoundly from the failure of myself and those I love to follow this resolution. They have also. Were you hearing me say these things to you rather than simply reading them, you would see tears in my eyes and hear my voice cracking with sorrow as I recall those past events and even reflect on what is happening around me as I write this. I beg you, for the sake of all that is good in this world, do not fail to heed this advice.

Unfortunately, not everyone seems to be able to do this. In fact, not everyone is even willing to attempt to follow this advice, particularly those who buy into the dangerous paradigm that "whatever I feel right now is real" in the sense that their feelings at that moment must be the only possible valid perspective on their current situation and are thus completely justified along with their reactions to those feelings. There are those who simply don't believe that such a wondrous and holy thing as insight practices could produce such profound difficulties. There are also those who do not believe in the maps or that the maps could possibly apply to their own very special and unique life. Lastly, there are a few whose pride and insecurity issues will not allow them to admit that they might be affected by the Dark Night in this way.

I would warn such people to STAY THE FUCK OUT OF THE

DARK NIGHT until they come to a place where they might be able to approximate at least some aspects of the above-mentioned resolution or apply the basics of the theory behind it. That means that if you are not willing to at least try to make and live by some version of my recommended resolution, you should not do insight practices and should not cross the A&P Event. Yes, I am a little bitter. Bitterness comes and goes.

I am a big fan of fast sports cars, but I wouldn't give one to a six-year-old kid. Just so, I am a big fan of insight practices, obviously, but I have come to the conclusion that those who are not willing to use them responsibly and intelligently should not use them, as it is too dangerous.

They cause too much trouble in the world to be of little if any benefit.

This is not likely to be a popular view, but I have experienced too much of what can go wrong when people fail to try to live up to such a resolution to come to any other conclusion.

The problem is that some people cross into the Dark Night

without doing formal insight practices. I did when I was about 15 and had no idea what was going on. How to reach these people I have no idea, but they tend to come wandering into spiritual communities soon enough. I hope they find people there who help them sort out what has happened to them can tell them the above advice. I my naïve dreams I imagine that one day there would be training on the maps and basic spiritual development in some generic, non-sectarian way in elementary school, just as we learn about biology and mathematics, and so would be just another ordinary, accepted, standard part of human education, and so everyone would know about these things as if they were the ordinary, natural things they were, but we are a long way from that now, and so hopefully a few who run into this technology will help spread it around and help people who have crossed the A&P Event to recognize it and handle it properly.

This resolution and the spirit implied by it are an aspect of training in morality, and this sort of morality is one of our best friends in the Dark Night. When we adopt the spirit of this resolution, we do our conscious best to craft our way of being so as to be kind and compassionate. Many people have commented that insight training is a

"monastic practice." If we are able to build our own virtual monastery through skillful speech and skillful action, then we do not need a monastery to protect us and the world from the potential side effects of our practices. We can live skillfully in the ordinary world and still make progress in insight.

However, there are those who are willing to buy the theory and spirit inherent in the above resolution but are so swamped by their personal issues that they simply cannot follow the above advice after they get into the Dark Night despite their kind and skillful intention to do so. My advice to them is to diligently and quickly seek professional help in the form of psychotherapists and their ilk until such time as they are able to follow something like the above-mentioned resolution.

Realize that this is not an optimal way to go, as the inherent lack of perspective of the Dark Night makes aspects of the therapeutic process more difficult, but for some there will be no other option and this solution is better than simply floundering. On the other hand, at least such people have tons of stuff bubbling loudly up for them to deal with, making some aspects of the therapeutic process easier. However, I would try to do just enough healing so that you can push on to the first stage of awakening with minimal bleed through and then finish whatever therapeutic process you began in the Dark Night

after you are out of it.

There another seemingly positive way of looking at the Dark Night, or the Knowledges of Suffering, one that doesn't really fit well with our mainstream ideals of how life should be. It is the view of the renunciate, which basically says, “Ah, now you see the pain of your materialistic life, of your cravings that will never bring you happiness, of your worldly attachments, and that house of cards you call a life. Far better to give it all up and take up the way of the dharma.” While I have generally advised doing completely otherwise, I can completely understand why one would do this. However, the problem comes when we have things like debt, children, aging parents and the like, and sorting out the ethics of these conflicts is complex. Regardless, the Dark Night does teach important lessons, and learning them is essential to moving to what comes next. These lessons do not require specific lifestyle choices for mastery. Instead, it is a question of clear perception of, you guessed it, the Three Characteristics of the sensations that occur during those stages. As I mentioned in Part I, each training has a specific kind of renunciation associated with it, and they couldn't be more different.

It is time to get back to describing Dissolution. As the stage of the Arising and Passing Away ends, the meditator may be left feeling raw and incompetent despite the fact that they are continuing to make valuable progress into deeper and deeper levels of profound insight.

This feeling that something is wrong when things are actually getting better and better can cause all sorts of problems during the Dark Night, especially to those not familiar with the standard maps.

On the other hand, having come through the A&P territory can be quite a relief, and so sometimes Dissolution can seem quite welcome.

Some will stop practicing here, as they feel they have “released the 189

Kundalini” and so are done for the time being. Dissolution feels like a very natural place to stop practicing, the only problem being that the later stages (Fear and the rest) tend to follow it soon enough even if one stops, though less intense practice leads to a less intense, if often prolonged, Dark Night.

However, those who wish to keep doing formal practice may find Dissolution frustrating. Whereas just one stage ago they could sit for hours and perceive the finest vibrations of reality in exquisite detail, now reality appears to be slipping away, vague, and hard to get a handle on.

Whereas we may have had stellar posture in the previous stage, now we go back to being ordinary mortals. Images of the body may even seem to completely disappear, similar to that which happens in

formless realms but without the clarity.

Practice is likely to be more difficult, and we may experience pain from sitting that was basically completely absent during the previous stage. This can be extremely frustrating for those who don't know that this is normal, and the desire to re-attain a fading past can greatly interfere with being present. In the face of these difficulties, I highly recommend noting practice. It may seem like a step back to some who abandoned it during the glory of the A&P, but the spiritual path is not a linear one. In the face of Dissolution and the stages that follow, noting practice can be very useful and powerful.

In short, if they are able to keep practicing (familiar theme yet?) and adjust to having to actually work to perceive things clearly again, they will begin to make further progress. This time the effort will have to be with a lighter and wider touch. Note well, if they give up in the stages of the Dark Night (or any time after the A&P Event), the qualities of the Dark Night will almost certainly continue to haunt them in their daily life, sapping their energy and motivation, and perhaps even causing feelings of unease, perhaps depression and even paranoia. Thus, the wise meditator is very, very highly encouraged to try to maintain their practice despite the potential difficulties so as to avoid getting stuck in these stages!

I think of Dissolution as the couch potato stage, though it can also have a sense of sensual languor to it. A hallmark of Dissolution is that it is suddenly hard to avoid getting lost in thought and fantasy when

meditating. We may feel somehow disconnected from our life. Another effect that can be very noticeable at this stage is that actions just don't happen easily. For instance, you might be going to lift your hand to turn off your alarm clock, but your hand just doesn't move. You could move your hand, but somehow things just tend to stop with the intention and get nowhere. Eventually you move your hand, but it might have been just a bit tiring to do so. That's what Dissolution can feel like.

Meditation can be the same way, and until one breaks out of this, things can get a bit mired down in the overstuffed cushions of Dissolution.

However, when the perception of things ending becomes clearer again, there arises...

6. FEAR

The clarity and intensity begin to return, but now this stage can involve all sorts of frightening distortions of perception when sitting, accompanied by great feelings of unease, paranoia, fearfulness, and/or

"the willies." It can even sometimes seem that our body is falling

in tatters through the floor or that we are rotting away. If we have strong concentration tendencies, we may see horrifying or disconcerting visions. Vibrations from here on out should no longer change frequency with the phase of the breath as they did in stage 4 and for the next few stages tend to be slower than those in that previous stage.

Strangely, Fear can also be a just a bit rapturous in the ways that a horror movie can be or in the way that riding a roller coaster at night can be simultaneously scary and exciting. However, the nice side of this stage tends to be greatly overshadowed by the dark side. We are being asked to accept the full range of life here as it is. Acceptance and clear, precise awareness of the true nature of the actual sensations that make up all of this are the key in all of the Dark Night stages as before. On the mild side, this stage might manifest as just a slightly heightened sense of non-specific anxiety. As fear passes and our reality continues to strobe in and out and fall away, we are left feeling...

7. MISERY

This stage can be characterized by great feelings of sadness and loss.

Again, there can almost be something nice about the heartfelt depth of these feelings, but this tends to be greatly overshadowed by the dark side 191

of them. We are having our whole concept of self and the world as being permanent, able to satisfy, and even being us or separate from us being torn down and violated by the now undeniable truth of the Three Characteristics. There can be a lot of grieving in this process.

This is hard to accept, and our resistance to this process causes us misery. Becoming lost in the content of these sensations and being unable to see their true nature is a somewhat common cause of failure to progress and failure to live healthily. On the mild side, we may just feel a bit like after we do after we have been crying. Misery is the transition point between the Drum-like 5-8Hz part of the Dark Night and the very complex, irritating frequencies that follow. Attention continues to get wider and the center more blind. As things continue to fall apart, clearly demonstrate their unsatisfactoriness and their selflessness, this can cause...

8. DISGUST

We become disgusted with the whole thing. This is where the buzzy 10-18+ Hz chaotic vibrations around the periphery really begin to get strong. Through this section of the Dark Night, our ability to see objects in the center of our attention is poor, and it may feel like our minds are being stretched wide and yet contracting at the same time.

We begin to feel completely tormented by our noisy and repetitious minds (a classic sign of this stage), by a body that is full of suffering and unpleasant sensations, and by a world that is falling apart. Perceiving thoughts as thoughts gets harder and harder, and thus getting caught by our stuff gets increasingly easier. On the mild side, one might just feel subtly revolted and disappointed with reality in general, or perhaps have the slightly creepy feeling of crawling skin. On the strong side, we see nothing to cling to, no self to be found, and we begin to wish the whole edgy thing would just end, also called...

9. DESIRE FOR DELIVERANCE

At this stage, we are fed up with the whole thing, but at a level that transcends mere suicidal thoughts. Thus, it is actually beneficial though it seems otherwise. No longer do we look forward to anything but the complete ending of all sensations, i.e. the first taste of Nirvana. We just wish the noise in our minds would stop cold, but are unable to will this 192

to happen. We wish the vibrations, which can be quite intense, harsh and irritating by this stage, would all go away forever. If we fail to associate the pain ending with deep insights but instead falsely associate it with changing something in our ordinary life, we are likely to wander far and wide until we come to realize the limitations of ordinary solutions.

This is the stage when people are most likely to quit their jobs or schooling out of frustration and go on a long retreat or spiritual quest.

Fascination with celibacy as somehow being “a higher spiritual path” can arise. Our renunciation trip can be very disorienting to partners, particularly if we were going to the opposite extreme of intense sexuality during the stage of the Arising and Passing Away which probably occurred relatively recently, so try to be sensitive to their needs if you can. Somewhere in here, there can arise the tendency to try to get one’s life and finances in order so that one can leave the world behind for a time and have something to come back to without having to worry about such things for a while. A profound resolution to push onward can arise at this stage driven by our powerful frustration and the powerful compassion in it. We make the last push for freedom, the push against the seemingly impenetrable wall of...

10. RE-OBSERVATION

This stage may not sound like much of a problem, as it has such a boring-sounding name, but this stage is often, though not always, like a brick wall, particularly the first few times we run into it. It can be as if all of the stages of the Dark Night converge again for one last important lesson, the lesson of Re-observation. We must perceive the

true nature of the sensations that make up all of our ideas of perfection, all of the ideals we cling to, all images of how the world should be and shouldn't be, all desire for anything to be other than the way that it is as well as all desire for enlightenment that is anything other than this. It may seem impossible to sit for even a minute, as the levels of restlessness and aversion to meditation and all experience can get quite high. This stage and part of stage 3 (The Three Characteristics) can share some common features. This should be seen as a strong warning to those who are prone to being overly certain about "where they are." I get a reasonable number of emails from people who claim they are sure they 193

are in re-observation, and shortly thereafter they are describing A&P

territory, meaning that they had just been in The Three Characteristics territory, not Re-observation. Continuing to investigate the true nature of these sorts of sensations and our map theories is often difficult, and this is a common cause of failure to progress.

Now, I am about to describe all sorts of emotional or psychological manifestations that can sometimes happen at this stage. The more extreme the description of a possible side-effect of this stage, the rarer that side-effect is likely to be, particularly those that sound like descriptions of mental illness. For someone who is staying at the level of bare sensate experience, as I strongly recommend, the only difficult manifestations that seem to be quite common are a strong sense of aversion to formal meditation and experience, and a deep sense of primal frustration, though these tend to fall quickly in the face of good practice, and if our concentration is strong enough and our other factors are in balance, we may move through this stage with no problem at all.

The aversion to meditation and experience are due to the fact that the vibrations by this point can be quite fast and harsh and the noise in our repetitive minds quite irritating. Some of my own descriptions of this stage while on retreat have included such phrases as "the mindstorm" and "a bracing work in D minor for six sense doors, hailstorm and stuttering banshee." If we are very powerful meditators, it can literally feel as if we will be torn apart by these vibrations, and this is exactly what we are trying to accomplish. Even if the other odd manifestations do arise, if we are practicing well they should not last very long at all, at best minutes, at worst hours or days.

All of that said, and before I go on, those who are crossing this territory with strong concentration abilities and using some very rarefied object, such as a complex visualization on sacred geometry as one of many possible examples, may, if they are very good, pass

through this stage with little or no difficulty at all, and all they may notice is that the thing gets wider and wider, the patterns get more complex and attain to wider, more spherical dimensions and perhaps many-fold symmetries, and that it comes around to encompass basically the whole field of experience, kind of like watching an IMAX movie of a moving

technicolor spirograph in the front row, or some similar thing. I use this 194

example partly due to my own experiments and partly to illustrate general points. Different objects will produce different specifics, such as colors, images, etc., while some universal aspects of what happens during this stage will remain basically the same.

You see, Re-observation is actually all fluff and no substance, but if you confuse fluff for substance, the effect will be the same as if it actually had substance. It is like a toothless dog with a ferocious bark. If you run screaming or faint from fear when the dog barks, then it needed no teeth to prevent your progress. The corollary is that the primary sign that the negative side effects that may occur in the Dark Night are actually not associated with insight stages but instead are due to other processes is that they do not change much in the face of strong and accepting investigation or stopping practice entirely. That said…

This stage is sometimes called the “rolling up the mat stage” and is when many who joined monasteries in the stage of the Arising and Passing Away now give up and disrobe. People on retreats tend to need lots of reassurance and often leave right then even with good guidance and encouragement. There can be the distinct feeling that it is impossible to go forward and useless to go back, which is exactly the lesson they should learn. Acceptance of right here and right now is required, even if it seems that this mind and this body are quite unacceptable and unworthy of investigation. No sensations are unworthy of investigation!

One of the hallmarks of the early part of this stage is that we may begin to clearly see exactly what our minds do all day long, see with great clarity how the illusion of a dualistic split is even created in the first place sensation by sensation, moment to moment, but somehow there is not yet enough spaciousness of perspective and equanimity to make good use of this information. This can be very frustrating, as we wonder how many times we have to learn these lessons before they stick.

Great feelings of frustration and disenchantment with life,

relationships, sex, jobs, moral codes and “worldly” responsibilities may sometimes emerge at this stage in ways that can cause all sorts of

disruption and angst. These aspects of one's life can temporarily seem bland and pointless at this stage, though it may seem that this will always be the way one feels about them. This stage can mimic or perhaps 195

manifest as some degree of clinical depression. Beware of making radical life changes that cannot easily be undone (such as a divorce), or firing off angry emails to your boss based upon the temporary feelings that may arise during this stage. For those that recognize that they are in this stage, some sort of active mental compensation for these potential effects can be helpful so as to keep one's life functioning. It can help one appear more "together" than one feels, and thus maintain relationships, jobs, studies, etc. at some sort of functional level. This can be very skillful if it is also combined with practice that allows the experiences of this stage to be acknowledged and understood as well.

Layers of unhelpful and previously hidden expectation, pressure and anxiety can show their true uselessness, though this beneficial process can be very confusing and difficult. We may get the sense that we have never had such a strong feeling life, and until we get used to this new awareness of our previously subtle emotions, this stage can be quite overwhelming. Occasionally, people can also have what can seem like full psychotic breaks during this stage, though if these are truly a side effect of insight practices they should pass quickly. The big trick here is to continue to acknowledge and accept the content but also continue to see the true nature of the sensations that make up these natural phenomena. This can be extremely hard to do, especially if people have chanced upon this stage without the benefit of the guidance of a well-developed insight tradition and teachers who can recognize this territory.

Those who do not know what to do with this stage or who get

overwhelmed by the mind states can get so lost in the content that they begin to lose it. This is the far extreme of what can happen in this stage.

Fear is frightening, misery is miserable, and seemingly psychotic episodes are very confusing and destabilizing. In the face of such experiences, we may swing to the opposite extreme, clinging desperately to grandiose images of ourselves. These things can easily perpetuate themselves, and this can become a blatantly destructive mental habit if people persist in wallowing in these dark emotions and their deep and unresolved issues for too long. It can be like cognitive restructuring from Hell.

If the content continues to be bought without the ability to see its true nature, then the mind can spiral down and down into madness and despair. When people mention “touching their own madness” on the spiritual path, they are often talking about this stage. This stage can make people feel claustrophobic and tight. If they push to make progress, they can feel that they are just getting wound up tighter and tighter. If they do nothing then they are still suffering anyway.

The advice here is: stick with it but don’t try to force it. Pay attention to balancing effort and acceptance. Remember that discretion is the better part of valor. Practice in moderation as well as maintaining a long-term view can be helpful. Think of practice as a life-long endeavor, but do just what you can each day. Stay present-oriented. Walks in nature or places with large, expansive views can help, as can exercise. This stage has the power to profoundly purify us, given sufficient commitment to just trying to sit with it, be clear, precise and accept all this despite the pain and anguish, both physical and mental, that it can bring. If on retreat: sit and walk according to the schedule, apply the technique as prescribed every second if humanly possible, and do not leave early!

This stage is actually a profound opportunity to see clearly the pain of the dualistic aspect of our attachments, aversions, desires, hopes, fears and ideals, as all this has been amplified to an unprecedented level. It is this stage that makes possible the path of heroic effort, diligent investigation of this moment based upon the powerful desire for enlightenment, as at this stage all of the unskillful aspects of this desire are beaten out of the meditator with a force equivalent to the suffering caused by them. You can actually get very far on highly imbalanced and goal-oriented practice, and it can give sufficient momentum and meditation skills so that, should you get your ass kicked in this stage, one continues making progress quickly anyway.

Again, if the meditator stops practicing here, they can get stuck and haunted by this stage in the whole of their life until they complete this first progress of insight. Their lack of practice will deprive them of the primary benefits of this stage (i.e., the increased perceptual abilities that allowed them to get this much insight in the first place) and reduce their chances of getting beyond it, and yet the emotional consequences can remain long after the skills in meditation have faded.

They can become “Chronic Dark Night Yogis,” meditators that somehow just don’t figure out how to get past this stage for very long periods of time. You would be surprised by how many of these

people there are out there. Their failure to unstick themselves may be due to their own psychological makeup, poor instruction, imagining that the spiritual life is all about bliss and wonderful emotions, believing in absurd models of spirituality that do not allow for the full range of the emotional and mental life, or chancing upon this stage outside of a well-developed insight tradition, which is what happened to me at about age 15. I was a Chronic Dark Night Yogi for 10 years without having any idea what the hell was happening to me, so I can speak on this topic with some authority. Further, I have gone through numerous other Dark Nights at the higher stages of awakening and come across the same issues again and again. Being stuck in the Dark Night can manifest as anywhere from chronic mild depression and free-floating anxiety to serious delusional paranoia and other classic mental illnesses, e.g.

narcissism and delusions of grandeur (my personal favorites). Dark Night Yogis may act with a strange mixture of dedicated spirituality and darkness.

I mentioned that the A&P Event could impart a bit of the inspirational, radical religious leader quality to those prone to such things. For these same individuals, Stage 10 can sometimes have a bit of the paranoid, apocalyptic cult leader quality to it, a confused whirlwind of powerful inspiration and despair. Just because someone has borderline or antisocial personality disorder doesn't mean they can't make progress in insight, and when they hit these stages it can be pretty wild.

We may all have our own particular neurotic tendencies that come out when we are under stress, but if you feel that you are really losing it: get help, particularly from those who know this territory firsthand and are willing to talk honestly about it! Don’t be a macho meditator and get stuck, and don’t imagine that spiritual practice can’t cause some wild and sometimes unpleasant side effects. One of the best things about working with a thoroughly qualified and realized insight meditation teacher before we get into this sort of trouble is that they will have some 198

idea of our baseline level of sanity and balance and thus know what we are capable of.

That said, I suspect that both the Mushroom Factor and the dharma jet set culture of teachers popping in and out with little chance for students to have meaningful contact with them off retreat contributes to the non-trivial number of Dark Night Yogis out there. I suspect that there are fewer problems with Chronic Dark Night Yogis in traditions where the maps of what can happen in this territory are well known and in which there are teachers who are very accessible

and honest about their humanity and the possible range of the spiritual terrain.

On the other hand, sometimes genuine mental illness or unrelated emotional or psychological difficulties can show up in people's lives.

Blaming it all on the Dark Night may not always be accurate or helpful, though if you have recently crossed the A&P Event and not completed an insight cycle or gotten into the next stage (Equanimity), there is going to be some Dark Night component mixed in with whatever else is going on.

Meditation traditions tend to attract what can seem like more than their fair share of the spiritual, emotional and mental equivalents of the walking wounded. Sorting out what is what can sometimes get murky and may require the help of both those who know this insight territory and those who deal with routine mental illness and emotional and psychological difficulties. The best combination would be someone who knows both. I have a highly enlightened friend who has found it very useful to take medication to treat his bipolar disorder. There is something very down-to-earth and realistic about that. These practices won't save us from our biology. They merely reveal something in the relationship to it.

On the other hand, there are those that are so deeply indoctrinated by the models of "working through" our "dark stuff" that whenever it comes up they turn to psychotherapy or a whole host of other ways of getting their issues to "resolve" or go away. This view implies false solidity and an exaggerated importance to these things that can make it very hard to see the true nature of the sensations that make them up.

The trap here is that we turn a basic crisis of fundamental identity into a witch-hunt for the specific things in our life that we imagine are making 199

The Progress of Insight

us this dissatisfied with our basic experience. If someone has gotten to this level of practice, no amount of tinkering with the specifics of our life will ever solve the fundamental issue.

That doesn't mean that some of the dissatisfactions with specific aspects of our life may not be valid, and in fact they often are quite valid. However, these relative issues get mixed in with a far deeper issue, that of who we really are and aren't, and until this progress of insight has been completed, this mixture tends to greatly exaggerate our specific criticisms of those things in our life that could actually stand improvement and work. Learning this lesson can be very hard for some people, and the dark irony is that they may wreck their relationships, careers and finances, as well as emotional and physical health, trying to get away from their own high level of insight into the

true nature of reality. Until they are willing to work on a more direct, sensate level, there is no limit to the amount of angst and negativity they can project onto their world. I have seen this play out again and again in myself and in the lives of my dharma companions. It can be a very ugly business.

My advice for such situations is this: if, after careful analysis of your insight practice leads you to the conclusion that you are in Re-observation, resolve that you will not wreck your life through excessive negativity! Resolve this strongly and often. Follow your heart as best you can, but try to spare yourself and the world from as much needless pain as is possible. Through sheer force of will, keep it together until such time as you are willing to face your sensate world directly and without anesthesia or armor. I have seen what happens when people do otherwise, and have come to the conclusion that, in general, things go badly if people do not follow this advice, though some unexpected good can always come from such situations.

The framework of the Three Trainings and the three types of

suffering that is found within each of their scope can be helpful here as well. Since people are generally not used to facing fundamental crises of identity, i.e. the basic issue in Re-observation, they are not familiar with the pain of fundamental suffering. Being unfamiliar with the pain of fundamental suffering, they are likely to imagine that it is actually suffering produced by the specifics of their ordinary world. However, if you have gotten to Re-observation, in short, if you have found these 200

techniques to be effective, have faith that the remaining advice may be of value and try to fulfill this part of the experiment. That is, if you are in Re-observation, the task that confronts you is to dissociate the fundamental suffering you now know all too well from the specifics of your life in an ordinary sense.

Following this advice may sound dangerous, heartless or bizarre to some people. It is a valid criticism. In an ideal world, we would not have to go around second-guessing ourselves and the sources of our suffering in the specific way that I advocate here. In an ideal world, we would really have our psychological trip together, be able to stay with the practice during these stages, and thus cross quickly through the Dark Night and finish this practice cycle. It definitely can be done.

However, we are not always ideal practitioners, and thus the Dark Night often causes the problems mentioned above that need to be dealt with somehow. My solutions to what happens when we cannot or will not do insight practices in the face of the Dark Night are also not ideal.

However, the outcomes are likely to be much healthier in the

short and long term than those that come from simply allowing unrestrained Dark Night bleed-through. Strangely, I have come to the conclusion that simply practicing is often much easier than trying to stop Dark Night bleed-through if we are willing to just try it, though it can easily seem otherwise. The old kindergarden evaluation, “Follows instructions, plays well with others,” is still a valuable standard in the Dark Night.

Not restraining one’s negativity and reactivity in the Dark Night is a bit like getting stinking drunk and then driving in heavy traffic rather than just sitting down and waiting to sober up. Not continuing to do insight practices in this stage is like going into surgery, opening up an incision, making some repairs, and then freaking out because the patient now has a big, bleeding incision and running away from the operating table, leaving them there to suffer. You could think of many ways to make the patient happy and try them all, but until you close up that wound they are gonna’ be pissed! Unfortunately, in this case you are both the surgeon and the patient. Face the wound and close it up! You obviously have the necessary skills, as you have gotten this far. Use them. The operation is nearly over.

201

The Progress of Insight

There are also those who try to investigate the true nature of their psychological demons and life issues but get so fixated on using insight to make them go away that they fail to hold these things in a wider, more realistic and appropriate perspective. This subtle corruption of insight practices turns them into another form of denial rather than a path to awakening. Drawing from the agendas of training in morality, in which there is concern for the specific thoughts and feelings that make up our experience, they fail to make progress in insight, whose agenda is simply to see the true nature of all sensations as they are. Both are important, but it is a question of timing.

I have come to the conclusion that, with very rare and fleeting exceptions, 95% of the sensations that make up our experience are really no problem at all, even in the hard stages, but seeing this clearly is not always easy. We tend to fixate on strong sensations when they arise, those that are very painful or very pleasant, and in these times we can miss the fact that most of our reality is likely made of sensations that are no big deal, thus missing many great opportunities for easy insights.

Further, the Dark Night can bring up all sorts of unfamiliar feelings that we rarely if ever have experienced with such clarity or intensity. Until we get used to these feelings, they can frighten us and make us reactive because of our unfamiliarity with them even if they

are not actually that strongly unpleasant.

I highly recommend using physical sensations, such as those of the breath, as the objects of inquiry during the Dark Night whenever possible, as plunging into emotional content, even with the intention of investigating it, can sometimes be a very hard way to go. Remember, whether we gain insight through investigating physical or mental objects is completely irrelevant! Insight is insight. Choose objects for investigation by which you don't get caught whenever possible. The best thing about reality, particularly in the Dark Night, is that you only have to deal with one little flickering sensation at a time. Staying on that level when doing insight practices is an unusually good idea. Pay attention to what is right in front of you, but keep your attention open.

All of that scary stuff said, there are people who breeze straight from the Arising and Passing Away on through the whole of the Dark Night in as little as a few easy minutes or hours and hardly notice it at all, so 202

don't let my descriptions of what can sometimes happen script you into imagining that the Dark Night has to be a gigantic problem. It absolutely doesn't. These descriptions of what can sometimes happen are merely there to help those who do encounter these sorts of problems to realize that these things can happen and so be more able to deal with them skillfully. There is no medal awarded for having a tough time in the Dark Night or for staying in it for longer than necessary, much to my dismay.

One of the more bizarre potholes we can fall into in the Dark Night is to become identified and fascinated with the role of The Great Spiritual Basket Case. "I am so spiritual that my life is a non-stop catastrophe of uncontrollable insights, disabling and freakish raptures, and constant emotional crises of the most profound nature. My spiritual abilities are proven and verified by what a mess I am making of my life.

How brave I am to screw up my life in this way! Oh, what a glorious and holy wreck I am." Both my sympathy and intolerance for those caught in this trap is directly related to the amount of time I have spent in that trap being just like them. Whereas we should not try to pretend that the Dark Night hasn't made us a basket case if it has done so, we should neither revel in being a basket case nor use the Dark Night as an excuse for not being as kind and functional as we can possibly be.

One way or the other, when we finally give up and rest in things as they are without trying to change them or be them, i.e. are very accepting of our actual humanity as well as clear about the Three

Characteristics of mental and physical phenomena, there arises...

11. EQUANIMITY

Finally, we really begin to understand and surrender to the truth of things. We accept the truth of our actual human lives as they are at a deep level. All of the "stuff" that the Dark Night may have brought up may still be going on, but somehow it has lost its ability to cause real trouble. Equanimity is much more about something in the relationship to phenomena than anything specific about the phenomena themselves.

Equanimity can have sort of a rough start, strangely enough, as well as some mildly painful and irritating sensations, but the meditator feels that some barrier has finally broken, a weight has lifted and practice can continue.

However, this stage can be such a relief after Re-observation that it is very tempting to solidify it into the fourth samatha jhana either because doing so is so nice or because of fear of falling back to Re-observation, which can easily occur. However, as I continue to mention, not investigating the qualities of this stage, such as peace, ease, and a panoramic perspective, causes failure to progress and makes falling back to Re-observation more likely.

The first vipassana jhana is about building up the basic skills of what is a physical sensations, what is a mental sensation, how they relate, and what the Three Characteristics feel like in practice. The Arising and Passing away is about seeing this very clearly and profoundly for the object of meditation. The Dark Night is about these insights then coming around to the background and seeing more complex emotional and psychological constructs of mental and physical sensations as they are. The fourth vipassana jhana, meaning this stage, is about seeing the true nature of even more complex, inclusive, subtle and fundamental things, like space, awareness, investigation, wonder, expectation, anticipation, peace, ease, questioning, and those sorts of things in ways that cut through the center and include the whole background and foreground as well.

This early stage can feel very familiar and "normal," like we have remembered something simple and good from our childhood. If we felt weary of the world in the Dark Night, we may suddenly find that the world is just fine and may even be more engaged with it and excited about it than before. Again, these potentially radical mood swings can be very disorienting to those with whom we have close relationships. Try to be sensitive to this and their feelings. Confidence returns, but whereas there may have been a Rambo-like quality to it during stage 4. The Arising and Passing Away, now there is more of

the cool, charming confidence of James Bond (sorry about the purely masculine images here).

Somewhere in here there can arise a tendency to see the world and those in it in very strange and unusual ways. I will give one example from my own experience, but realize that tremendous variation is possible here, so don't take this too seriously. It is meant to try to convey a very general concept. I remember looking around me at all the 204

people on retreat and even all the chickens, birds and puppies in the monastery, and seeing them all simultaneously as "little mush demons"

(little squat greenish creatures with big, sad mouths and eyes) and fully enlightened buddhas at the same time. They were both. In fact, we were both.

We were deluded and small, yet transcendent and luminous. I

could see in some very strange way exactly how each of them, including me, was caught in the world of form and confusion, trying to find happiness and yet doing so from such a small and frightened place, and yet all of this was vast buddha nature, all of this was the natural, luminous and compassionate dance of God. Such strange perspectives that try to resolve paradoxical insights do not always occur, but this is included here in case they do and perhaps to provoke knowing laughter from those with their own unique stories from this part of the path.

More sexual and stylized versions of these experiences can also explain where some of the more exotic tantric teachings come from.

Sometimes the early part of stage 11 can produce a real sense of freedom in the conventional sense, freedom from cares, worries, and even responsibilities and social conventions. One may sometimes feel that one is simply beyond everything, and it must be admitted that this is a wonderful feeling. It tends to fade quickly enough on its own, but it might be possible to get caught by it if one stopped practicing entirely.

Those who became spiritual fanatics or freaks after the A&P and during the Dark Night may now begin to act much more like their old selves, with their spiritual path being much less of a Big Holy Deal. About damn time…

Visions of bright lights may arise once more, but they are really more associated with stage 4, The Arising and Passing Away. Again, as with that earlier stage, the meditator is able to sit for longer and longer periods of time and begins to clearly perceive the Three Characteristics with spaciousness and breadth. The big difference is that the A&P is more about the object of meditation and Equanimity is

much more about the whole sensate universe. There is less rapture and more equanimity than in the stage of the Arising and Passing Away. There are rarely if ever the spontaneous physical motions and odd breathing patterns that come with that earlier stage. Unfortunately, just to make 205

things confusing, there is often a single double-dip unknowing event, with one being halfway down the breath and the other at the end of that breath, very soon after the shift from Re-observation to Equanimity.

In the early part of this stage, reality may appear a bit “chunky” for a while, and practice may seem quite possible but may seem to require steady but sustainable work. If one is tired, one may begin having dropouts that are similar to what occurred in Dissolution but more extreme. It may be hard to read and pay attention, hard to listen to people and hear, hard to notice where one is and what one is doing.

The arising of some sort of fear of madness and death is not uncommon at this stage, but usually does not cause too much trouble and may even seem comical or welcome. A related and common feeling in the early part of this stage is the general sense that something big is about to happen, though this feeling is also common before the A&P

Event. These feelings are worthy of sensate investigation in a wide and inclusive way.

Reality can now be perceived with great breadth, precision, and clarity, and soon with no special effort. This is called “High Equanimity.” Vibrations may become predominant, and reality may become nothing but vibrations. Vibrating formless realms may even arise, with no discernable image of the body being present at all. It may feel like reality is trying to synchronize with itself, and that is exactly correct. Investigate this feeling. Phenomena may even begin to lose the sense that they are of a particular sense door, and mental and physical phenomena may appear nearly indistinguishably as just vibrations of suchness, sometimes referred to as “formations.”

I put off writing about formations for a long time, as they are a conceptually difficult topic. Further, the classical definition of formations is perhaps not so clear-cut, so I wondered about imposing my own functional and experiential definitions on the term. However, as the topic of formations has arisen in so many conversations recently, I thought that it would be worth taking on despite the difficulties.

I am going to define formations as the primary experience of insight meditation when one is solidly in the fourth vipassana jhana, the 11th ñana, High Equanimity, whose formal title is actually

Knowledge of Equanimity Concerning Formations. For those of you who find this 206

circular definition completely unhelpful, formations have the following qualities when clearly experienced:

•

They contain all the six sense doors in them, including thought, in a way that does not split them up sequentially in time or positionally in space. If you could take a 3D moving photograph that also captured smell, taste, touch, sound, and thought, all woven into each other seamlessly and containing a sense of flux, this would

approximate the experience of one formation. From a fourth

vipassana jhana point of view and from a very high dharma point of view, formations are always what occur, and if they are not clearly perceived then we experience reality the way we normally do.

•

They contain not only a complete set of aspects of all six sense doors within them, but include the perception of space (volume) and even of time/movement within them.

•

When the fourth vipassana jhana is first attained, subtle mental sensations might again "split off" from "this side," much as in the way of the Knowledge of Mind and Body, but with the Three

Characteristics of phenomena and the space they are a part of being breathtakingly clear. Until mental and physical sensations fully synchronize on "that side," there can be a bit of a "tri-ality," in which there is the sense of the observer "on this side," and nearly the whole of body and mind as two fluxing entities "over there." As mental phenomena and physical phenomena gradually integrate

with the sense of luminous space, this experientially begs the question, "What is observing formations?" at a level that is way beyond just talking about it. For you Khabbala correspondance fans, these insights correspond to the the three points of Binah, the two points of Chockmah, and finally the single point of Kether.

•

Formations are so inclusive that they viscerally demonstrate what is pointed to by the concept of "no-self" in a way that no other mode of experiencing reality can. As formations become predominant, we are faced first with the question of which side of the dualistic split we are on and then with the question of what is watching what earlier appeared to be both sides. Just keep investigating in a natural and matter-of-fact way. Let this profound dance unfold. If you have 207

gotten to this point, you are extraordinarily close and need to do very little but relax and be gently curious about your experience.

•

When experienced at very high levels of concentration, formations lose the sense that they were even formed of experiences from distinguishable sense doors. This is hard to describe, but one might try such nebulous phrases as, “waves of suchness,” or “primal, undifferentiated experience.” This is largely an artifact of experiencing formations high up in the byproducts of the fourth vipassana jhana, i.e. the first three formless realms. This aspect of how formations may be experienced is not necessary for the

discussions below.

It is the highly inclusive quality of formations that is the most interesting, and leads to the most practical application of discussing formations. It is because they are so inclusive that they are the gateway to the Three Doors to stage 15. Fruition (see the chapter called The Three Doors). They reveal a way out of the paradox of duality, the maddening sense that “this” is observing/controlling/ subject to/separated from/etc. a “that.” By containing all or nearly all of the sensations comprising one moment in a very integrated way, they contain the necessary clarity to see through the fundamental illusions.

One of the primary ways that the illusion of duality is maintained is that the mind partially “blinks out” for a part of each formation, the part it wants to section off to appear separate. In this way, there is insufficient clarity to see the interconnectedness and true nature of that part of reality, and a sense of a self is maintained. When the experience of formations arises, it comes out of a level of clarity that is so complete that this “blinking” can no longer easily occur. Thus, when formations become the dominant experience, even for short periods of time, very profound and liberating insight is close at hand. That is why there are systematic practices that train us to be very skilled in being aware of our whole mental and physical existence. The more we practice being aware of what happens, the less opportunities there are for blinking.

During the first three insight stages, we gained the ability to notice that mental and physical sensations made up our world, how they interacted, and then began to see the truth of them. We applied these skills to an object (perhaps not of our choice, but an object 208

nonetheless), and saw it as it actually was with a high degree of clarity in the A&P. By this point, these skills in perceiving clearly have become so much of a part of who we are that they began to apply

themselves to the background, space and everything that seemed to be a reference point or separate, permanent self as we entered the Dark Night. However, our objects may have been quite vague or too disconcerting to have been perceived clearly. Finally, we get to equanimity and put it all together: we can see the truth of our objects and of the whole background and are OK with this, and the result is the perception of formations.

Formations contain within them the seeming gap between this and that, as well as sensations of effort, intimacy, resistance, acceptance, and all other such aspects of sensations from which a sense of self is more easily inferred. Thus, these aspects begin to be seen in their proper place, their proper context, i.e. as an interdependent part of reality, and not split off or a self.

Further, the level of clarity out of which formations arise also allows one to see formations from the time they arise to the time they disappear, thus hitting directly at a sense of a self or sensate universe continuing coherently in time. In the first part of the path the beginning of objects was predominant. In the A&P we got a great sense of the middle of objects but missed subtle aspects of the beginning and end. In the Dark Night the endings are about all we could really perceive clearly. Formations once again put all of this work we have done together in a very natural and complete way.

Formations also explain some of the odd teachings that you might hear about "stopping thought." There are three basic ways we might think about this dangerous ideal. We might imagine a world in which the ordinary aspects of our world which we call "thought" simply do not arise, a world of experience without those aspects of manifestation. You can get very close to this in very strong concentration states, particularly the 8th samatha jhana. We might also think of stopping experience entirely (as happens in Fruition), and this obviously includes thought.

Formations point to yet another possible interpretation of the common wish to "stop thought," as do very high levels of realization.

The seeming duality of mental and physical sensations is gone by the 209

time we are perceiving formations well. Thoughts appear as one luminous aspect of the phenomenal world. In fact, I challenge anyone to describe the bare experience of thinking or mental sensations in terms beyond those of the five "physical" sense doors. Thus, in the face of experiencing formations, it seems crude to speak in terms of thought as separate from those of visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory qualities, or even to speak in terms of these being separate entities.

When perceived clearly, what we usually call “thoughts” are seen to be just aspects of the manifesting sensate world that we artificially select out and label as thought. Just as it would be odd to imagine that an ocean with many shades of blue is really many little bits of ocean, in times of high clarity it is obvious that there is manifesting reality, and it is absolutely inclusive. Look at the space between you and this book. We don’t go around selecting out little bits of space and labeling them as separate. In the face of formations, the same applies to experience, and experience obviously includes the sensations we call thought.

Separating the early stages of Equanimity from its mature stage, there tends to be a “near miss,” moment when we get very close to the fruit of the path, which serves to really chill one out, as it were. From this point enlightenment is likely to be attained quickly as long as the meditator continues to simply practice and gently fine tune their awareness and precision, paying gentle attention to things like thoughts of progress and satisfaction with equanimity. At some point even this becomes boring, and a certain cool apathy and even forgetfulness arises.

Around this part of Equanimity there can arise the feeling that we are not really there, or that somehow we are completely out of phase with reality. Conducting our ordinary business may be difficult in this phase if we are out in the world rather than on the cushion, but it tends to last only tens of minutes at most. The sense that one is practicing or trying to get anywhere just vanishes, and yet this may hardly be noticeable at all. We sort of come back, with luminosity again growing predominant.

Then we get lost in thoughts about something, some strangely clear reverie, vision, object, or flight of fancy. By really buying in, we get set up to check out. When understanding is completely in conformity with the way things are, this is called...

12. CONFORMITY

This is why understanding things just as they are is so important.

This stage lasts only one moment and never arises again until one attains the next stage of enlightenment. The same is true of the next two stages.

Stages 12-14 (Conformity, Change of Lineage, and Path) also share the fact that they represent the three moments of the first entrance to transcendent ultimate reality (stage 15. Fruition) through one of the Three Doors. In subsequent attainments of Fruition at that path (during the stage of Review), the three moments before Fruition are not called Conformity, Change of Lineage and Path. These three

stages will get extensive treatment in the chapter on The Three Doors.

13. CHANGE OF LINEAGE

Having understood things just as they are, this next stage, which also lasts for just a moment, “does the damage” as a friend of mine joyfully put it. It permanently changes the minds of the meditators in ways that I will discuss in just a bit. They leave the ranks of the unenlightened and join the ranks of those that are. While the social designation of formal lineage transmission is a very useful thing to have received, the results of this stage are in fact what that symbolic act is all about. They have done it, and thus attain...

14. PATH

This stage also lasts just a moment, and after the first completed progress of insight it marks the first moment of the newly awakened being’s awakened life. The first time around, this is called “stream entry” or “first path” in the Theravada, the “fourth stage of the second path” or “the first bhumi” in the Tibetan tradition, and many names in Zen that are purposefully ambiguous. After a subsequent, new progress of insight it marks the attainment of the next level of awakening, and there are lots of names for those that will be discussed shortly. It is directly followed by...

15. FRUITION

This is the fruit of all the meditator's hard work, the first attainment of ultimate reality, emptiness, Nirvana, God or whatever you wish to call it. In this non-state, there is absolutely no time, no space, no reference 211

point, no experience, no mind, no consciousness, no nothingness, no somethingness, no body, no this, no that, no unity, no duality, and no anything else. Reality stops cold and then reappears. Thus, this is impossible to comprehend, as it goes completely and utterly beyond the rational mind and the universe. To “external time” (if someone were observing the meditator from the outside) this lasts only an instant. It is like an utter discontinuity of the space-time continuum with nothing in the unfindable gap.

The initial aftershocks, however, can go on for days, and may be mild or spectacular, fun or unsettling or some mixture of these. There are times when it is fun to show off, and this is one of those times.

Aftershocks I have noticed after paths include but are not limited to: the visceral feeling that sensory reality is so intense that the nerves in one’s forehead and upper neck may not be able to handle the strain, the feeling that one has become diffused into the atmosphere without a center, purpose, function, sense of direction or even of will, a feeling of joy and gratitude beyond what is normally possible welling through one’s being, the sense of discovery of that which one has most needed,

the profound sense of coming home, a quiet awe like the stillness after a great storm, and rapturous transcendent highs that make anything that happened after the A&P seem like dry toast.

Remember how I said in the section on the psychic powers that strong concentration and intent make magickal things happen? Just after the attainment of a path, particularly the first path, is a time when formal resolutions have an outrageous amount of power. The Buddha said that the greatest of all powers is to understand and then teach the dharma, meaning to attain to full realization, however you define it, and to then help others do the same. I had been advised to use this unique period in my practice well, and I resolved to attain to full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings as quickly as was reasonably possible. Despite all the complex consequences of having done so, I do not regret my decision in the least and highly recommend that you do the same.

On subsequent passes through Fruition of that path the mind tends to be refreshed, bright, quiet and clear for a while, and milder forms of the above listed phenomena may occur. It is as though someone hit the reset button and cleared out all the junk for a little while. There is a nice 212

bliss wave that tends to follow and may take a few seconds to develop. If you have not learned the concentration states yet, doing so in the afterglow of a Fruition can make them much easier to attain and master.

16. REVIEW

In this stage, the meditator just keeps practicing largely as before. In this way, they will learn to master the stages of insight, as they must pass through them again each time they wish to re-attain Fruition. The first few times through the cycle after the path has been obtained can sometimes be quite intense and even very disturbing, as the mind tends to be exceedingly powerful for a few days after a path has been gained and yet is navigating in territory that is not yet mastered. One is advised to be somewhat careful and perhaps very restrained in what one says and does during the few days and perhaps weeks after attaining a path or something that one thinks may be a path. However, it also sometimes happens that realizations are hardly noticed at all, or if they are noticed, there is simply the sense, “Well, I guess that’s done.” Powerful cycles and the sense that things have been completed are not sure signs that a progress of insight has been completed.

That said, when a progress of insight is completed, one may notice the mind simply not doing lots of useless things it used to do, and it may seem impossible that it even was able to do them.

However, it may take some time to figure out what the permanent implications of the path are and what is just a product of its lingering and transient afterglow. It is likely to take quite a while to really integrate the understandings that come from a path into one's way of being in the world.

Mixed in with the sense of what is different is also a growing sense of what hasn't been changed at all, what aspects of reality are still basically unenlightened and poorly perceived. After attaining the early paths, what has remained untouched by that level of understanding is usually fairly obvious. However, one of the difficulties with attaining higher levels of enlightenment is that the sense of what is left to do can become more and more vague and subtle. Again, give things time. Be patient. It can sometimes take a while, perhaps weeks, months or even years, to clearly see which understandings hold up under the pressures of the world and which fade. You might not get a clear sense of the limits of this path until you are well on your way to the next one.

Speaking of the world, Review is a great time to re-engage with the specifics of our life. It is an unfortunate but true fact that one of the possible side effects of the relentless focus on the Three Characteristics that produces these spectacular insights is the habit of not paying much attention to the specifics of our life. The specifics of our life are obviously very, very important, and so now is a great time to pay a lot of attention to them. Those around us may have noticed the side effects of the Dark Night or some of the other stages and be worried about us or even mad at us for how we behaved if we allowed too much to bleed through. It is not always possible to make up for that sort of damage, but now is a good time to try. Take the time to heal the old wounds you discovered in yourself or created in your life while you were in the Dark Night.

Also, go out and have some fun! Enjoy the richness of friendship, exercise, leisure, work, entertainment, service, and life in general. In short, do your best to make your life a great one in the conventional sense. You should have been trying to do that all along, but try to forgive yourself and learn from your mistakes if you were not able to do so.

Remember, the kind of renunciation that brings insights is seeing the true nature of things. If you can see the true nature of the sensations that make up a fun and healthy life, there is no need for any other type of renunciation! In fact, buying into a strong renunciation trip is well known for making people quite neurotic, and then the challenge is to see the true nature of the sensations that make

up renunciation-induced neuroses. I'm not convinced that this is an easier way to go.

After attaining a path, particularly the early ones, the feeling that one is particularly special is common, and from a certain point of view it is true and understandable. However, what is truer is that something in the understanding of the relationship to ordinary things is now "special," or at least somewhat unusual. The attainment of stream entry or a new stage of awakening should be a cause for joy and celebration.

Unfortunately, people who have never attained these things tend to react oddly or even poorly to such disclosures and sentiments. Strangely, many people are very excited about the idea of people getting enlightened but not the idea of you getting enlightened.

Those with higher levels of understanding than yours will know where you are coming from, but will also know how much more there is to go from their own experience, and their tendency to focus on that can be frustrating. One's teachers and more advanced companions may find it amusing to be reminded of what it was like to be caught up in the fascination with low levels of realization, but they know that eventually even that has to be seen in some other way. One of my favorite Chogyam Trungpa lines is, "You will never be decorated by your guru."

Even if you are, I doubt if it will be of any great benefit to you.

Thus, two ironies of the spiritual life that one can encounter here are that success can cause feelings of isolation and that the spiritual path can be a very lonely one indeed. Sometimes writing can help, as can finding those few people who seem to simultaneously be interested in hearing the details of what you are going through without reinforcing your fascination with these in ways that make it harder to see successes in their proper proportion.

It is also not uncommon to feel that what one has experienced is just so staggeringly profound that no one is likely to have ever really seen such amazing things, perhaps including one's teachers. However, if they are the real deal and qualified to teach you, they are very likely to have their own extensive list of spectacular and profound experiences and realizations. However, as such things are so rarely discussed openly, one may have a hard time believing this. As I have had to learn the hard way, those who are particularly prone to extroversion and immoderate speech in the face of recent insights can easily get themselves into somewhat embarrassing and humbling situations. On the other hand, eventually you may begin to outgrow or surpass your current teachers in understanding and ability. This in and

of itself can be confusing and frustrating, causing role reversals that not everyone handles well. You might be astounded at how easy it is to bruise the egos in the conventional psychological sense of those who have seen through the illusion of the ego in the high dharma sense.

As review continues, one gets very familiar with the territory of one's current path and its stages, and they may pass by more and more quickly and easily. It can begin to seem that the only way to move through the Review stages of insight is to not investigate reality too 215

closely. At some point, Fruition will no longer be as attractive and one will feel that one really could be practicing more clearly and precisely.

This is a strong sign that the next set of stages is ready to arise.

That said, there may be times when one simply doesn't want to make progress as one can't afford to be risking another Dark Night at that point in their life. Strong resolutions to stay in Review, a lack of really precise investigation and lots of indulgence in concentration states can help one stay in a Review phase until one is ready to move onward.

However, progress of some kind can only be postponed for so long, and the dharma has a relentless way of pushing us onward.

25.THE VIPASSANA JHANAS

The vipassana jhanas are a way of describing the stages of insight that is a bit more broad than the map that breaks the stages down into 16 ñanas. They are two descriptions of the same territory, and both have their uses. The vipassana jhanas differ from the concentration jhanas (samatha jhanas) in that they include the perception of the Three Characteristics, rather than the "pure" samatha jhanas that require ignoring the Three Characteristics to get them to appear stable and clean. However, the two may share many qualities, including very similar widths of attention and other aspects. There are eight vipassana jhanas, the first four that are formed, and the last four that are formless, with the odd exception of the fact that the eighth vipassana jhana (Neither Perception Nor Yet Non-Perception) cannot be easily investigated, as it is generally too subtle to clearly reveal the Three Characteristics. Thus, calling it a vipassana jhana is a bit problematic.

However, it is part of the standard pattern of progress, so is worthy of inclusion, and helps explain some of the material found in the old texts.

Remember how I mentioned in the chapter called Concentration vs.

Insight that the original texts used the same four or eight jhanas to delineate the states of concentration and the stages of insight?

Remember how I said that the delineation of the stages of insight didn't occur until the later commentaries? In the second half of the 20th Century, considerable work was done to try to resolve these maps. As with most terminological issues in the spiritual life, there is some disagreement about just how the jhanas and the stages of insight line up, and I will touch on these in this chapter.

The practical application of delineating the vipassana jhanas is that the traps that awaited us in the samatha jhanas can arise during the progress of insight, and so being able to apply the body of advice that deals with these occurrences can be very helpful. For instance, we may be going along in the progress of insight but get stuck when we stop investigating rapture, which is a part of the early jhanas and also of some of the early insight stages. Thus, realizing that there are some relationships between the samatha and vipassana jhanas can keep us on the lookout for aspects of our experience that we may be missing or

artificially solidifying, as it is so tempting to do so. Going the other way, if we have some mastery of a set of insight stages, we can use these stages to learn get into samatha jhanas by concentrating on solidifying their predominant positive qualities.

There are also those who say that the jhanas and stages of insight do not line up at all, but this is too doctrinal, not in accord with what one experiences on the cushion (or in some other posture), and doesn't help resolve the problems created in the original texts of the Pali Canon. For those who are still die hard traditionalists and believe that the jhana terminology only applies to pure concentration practices, I offer the following quote from the Buddha that is found in my favorite sutta,

#111, One by One as They Occurred, in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, as translated by Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi:

“And the states in the first jhana – the applied thought, the sustained thought, the rapture, the pleasure, and the unification of mind; the contact, feeling, perception, volition, and mind; the zeal, decision, energy, mindfulness, equanimity and attention – these states were defined by him one by one as they occurred; known to him they arose, known to him they were present, known to him they disappeared. He understood thus: ‘So indeed, these states, not having been, come into being; having been, they vanish.’”

Those with traditional views can squirm and pontificate any way they like, but this guy is clearly maintaining an extremely fast, consistent and precise investigation of impermanence and is thus clearly doing insight practices.

To digress for just a moment into another rant, the guy the Buddha is talking about here is none other than my hero, Sariputta, who incidentally is often the whipping boy of much ridiculous and degrading Mahayana propaganda. Don't get me wrong, the Mahayana has done some great things in its day, but ragging on someone with this level of skill and insight is just hypocritical and arrogant beyond reason. The Buddha says that Sariputta goes on to do very precise and powerful insight practices high up into the formless realms and attains to very liberating insights. I often hear Nouveau Tibetan Buddhists making comments that clearly indicate that they feel themselves to be quite 218

qualified to denigrate his practice and don't seem to notice how ironic this is, as they are almost always those whose own spiritual progress doesn't qualify them to lick the muddy sandals of someone with a fraction of Sariputta's talents. When one in a thousand of the meditators I meet who make these absurd and insulting statements about Sariputta can do what he could do or understand what he understood, I'll eat this book. You have no idea how good it feels to write paragraphs like this one.

Back to business. All of this map stuff is only helpful if it keeps you practicing clearly and in a way that brings results. I will discuss more of the pros and cons of maps soon enough.

BILL HAMILTON'S MODEL

The vipassana jhana model I like the most because it is the one that most clearly fits with my extensive investigation of the vipassana jhanas is the one that was used by the late, great Bill Hamilton. He was also quite a mighty meditator in his own right, if a highly under-appreciated one.

True, he was a quirky old bat on a good day, but he also died an arahat and a mighty scholar who had complete mastery of the formless realms.

There was nothing particularly spectacular about Bill's life other than his understanding of it, and he died in poverty and obscurity in basic denial of the severity of his pancreatic cancer. I have never met anyone who had given the question of the vipassana jhanas more consideration, and his fascination with complex models was remarkable. A quick digression here about Bill, as I did dedicate this book to his memory...

Bill Hamilton was not only a meditation master, he was also a

rogue teacher and basically felt like an outcast from the modern international Vipassana community. The guy was basically too smart, too

uncompromising, too scholarly, and too dedicated to non-watered-down dharma and to absolute mastery to be a popular mainstream teacher.

He didn't teach to make people feel good about themselves, with friends, or attain to power, fame or money.

His obscurity was a tragic loss for the many people who didn't know about him. However, for me and a few others who knew about him and were willing to put up with the fact that he was basically a strange, suspicious, perhaps paranoid, and fairly quirky dude, Bill Hamilton was just what we were looking for.

Bill seemed to live for the sole purpose of sharing his dharma rather than for flying around the world, making money, or being popular.

Unlike the few other Western dharma teachers with his level of mastery, you could call Bill on the phone and talk for hours about this stuff, and then you could do it again. His very unpopularity made him a true and accessible teacher. The other nice things about Bill were that he would talk about actual mastery (though you had to drag it out of him) and also had incredibly high standards that I found quite refreshing.

Bill also taught in a very interesting way. His style was basically to seem extremely skeptical that any of your descriptions of any experiences could really have anything to do with the attainment of anything. This was basically quite irritating, but it made his students question deeply whether or not they were really experiencing what they thought they were and so look more deeply at the truth of each moment. It also served as a helpful counterbalance to his interest in models and specifically named levels of attainment. His teaching style didn't win him many friends, but it was powerful and served his ends.

Part of my fantasy is that a bit of his edge, uncompromising attitude and deep understanding may have come through in this work, though it must be stated explicitly that Bill never let on that he was particularly impressed with anything I ever described in my own practice.

Back to discussing Bill's Vipassana Jhana model. The table below explains which ñanas fall into which jhanas, and is a re-arrangement of the table in the beginning of the chapter on the Progress of Insight: Vipa ssa na Jhana Ñanas

First

1-3: Mind and Body, Cause and Effect, Three Characteristics
Second
4: The Arising and Passing Away
Third
5-10: The Dark Night
Fourth-Eighth
11-14: Equanimity, Conformity, Change of Lineage, Path

Thus, when in each of those ñanas, one can learn something from its jhana aspect, and when in each of the jhanas one can notice what insight territory is available there. Further, as the division between

samatha and vipassana is actually not nearly so straightforward as some would make it out to be, there can be a lot of natural movement back and forth that can occur between vipassana jhanas and samatha jhanas even when trying to keep to just one side. As the Three Characteristics are always presenting themselves, even in seemingly created, blissful, stable samatha territory, those with strong mindfulness and

concentration may have to work to avoid perceiving them. Also, those doing strong insight practice may again and again chance into territory that has a more samatha feel, and if they are expecting things to be purely by the ñana descriptions they may get lost or confused by this.

Lastly, those who have attained at least stream entry are constantly cycling through the ñanas from the 4th to the 11th and then to Fruition, so even if they try to do pure samatha practice, the pull towards each next ñana/vipassana jhana is strong, and they basically are always from then on doing some fusion of the two even when they try to keep things purely on the samatha side.

I will illustrate the vipassana jhanas with a description of some candle-flame meditation I did when on retreat and playing around with the samatha jhanas by using kasinas. Kasinas are various traditional practices that involve using physical objects such as colored disks, candles, etc. as a starting point to attain samatha jhanas, powers and the like. They are described in the standard references I list in the chapter on the the Concentration States.

The retreat when I first really nailed down the details of the vipassana jhanas was a 17 day retreat that I went on when I was an anagami (the third stage of awakening in one of the models of awakening, to be discussed shortly). I didn't begin playing with this territory until around the second week of the retreat, and by that

point my concentration was very strong and flexible. It didn't take me more than a day before I could go through the following cycle. Initially, I would stare at a candle flame until I really could stay with it, then there would be a natural shift, I would close my eyes, and I would see the visual purple phenomena where the afterimage of the flame was burned onto my retina.

This would fade in a few seconds to be replaced by a red dot in the center of my visual field. The red dot was clear, very round, pure, bright 221

and seemingly stable. However, within a minute or so it would begin to shake, roll off to one side, and I would notice all sorts of things about how intention and observation messed with the position, stability, and clarity of the dot. First seeing the dot is the first samatha jhana, and in this case is the equivalent of Mind and Body, where mental phenomena become clear external objects. Noticing things about intention influencing the position and stability of the dot is cause and effect.

Shortly thereafter this would become irritating and the dot would begin to shake, shudder, split up, spin off to one side or the other, and generally seem to misbehave quite on its own. This was the entrance to the Three Characteristics. After a while of this, practice would shift, become naturally stronger, and this slightly larger red dot would appear in the center again that stayed there on largely its own, but it had a gold spinning star in its center that would spin on its own with a speed and direction that varied with the phase of the breath, which I noticed when I would break my focus enough to notice that. This addition of motion, the image happening on its own, and somewhat wider attention (wider dot), not to mention bliss when I broke my concentration a bit and focused on my body, is the entrance to the second vipassana jhana.

The red dot with the spinning gold star would gradually acquire purple, green and blue rings around its outside, and then there would be a sudden shift where the red dot would vanish and be replaced by a slightly larger black dot. The black dot initially would seem to be a good focus, but quickly the area around the black dot got more interesting, with many very complex multi-point stars all circling slowly around it, getting wider and wider, with the interference patterns between them getting more and more complex, while the black dot faded somewhat, but to what was unclear. This addition of a problem perceiving the center but with complex patterns of experience with multiple frequencies going out to the periphery marks the early and middle phases of the third vipassana jhana. Further, as the thing got wider, there was this slightly disconcerting feeling that

attention was out of phase with the visuals.

As the complex patterns around the outside began to become more spherical as the edges wrapped around towards me, they began to be made out of lines that had more of a rainbow quality to them, with 222

many complex motions and many-fold symmetry. This was harder to pay attention to and simultaneously comprehend it all, marking the mature third vipassana jhana and the later stages of the Dark Night.

Note, as this is being done with almost no fixation on psychological content and with very strong concentration, I did not have any of the typical feelings that sometimes accompany this territory when it cycles through with less concentration. Instead, it stayed at the level of geometry, image and light except when I widened my attention somewhat to notice other aspects.

This complex sphere on which was unfolding more and more

complex patterns would then shift to something far more inclusive of space and the center of attention, thus becoming much more three dimensional. At this point, things seemed to happen on their own, but in a silent, clear, all encompassing way that was way beyond the second jhana, and this marks the entrance to the fourth vipassana jhana.

As things would organize, there would arise all sorts of images, from Buddhas to black holes, from brilliantly formed Tantric images (Vajrasattva with consort, etc.) to complex abstract, three dimensional designs that included the whole field of attention, with all made of rainbow lines, luminous, living, and very clear. I could end the cycle with essentially any image I wished with an ease I had never previously achieved. If I had not previously determined an image to end with, the surprises were just as good as anything I came up with and sometimes better. The point is that if you get your concentration strong enough, you can do these things also.

Shortly after the clear image would arise, attention would shift to include the fundamental characteristics of the whole thing at level that was perfectly inclusive of what ordinarily would be called subject and object, and Fruition would arise as the whole thing vanished through one of the Three Doors, but with a clarity that is rare. Then I would open my eyes, stare at the flame, and do it all again. Each cycle took about 10-15 minutes, but I could linger in each stage for longer if I consciously resisted the pull to move onward.

While obviously this example involves very clean samatha-like images, very strong concentration, and was done by an advanced practitioner under relatively special conditions, this candle flame 223

technique can be very interesting, and in classes I have taught some were able to quickly get to the later jhanas without too much time or effort. Some people just seem to have a natural ability to visualize, or focus on a mantra, or some other object, and it makes a lot of sense of draw on these natural tendencies. It can also be fun to develop these fronts even if this is not your strong suit, as it helps expand the range of your practice. Thus, consider playing around with using other objects and focuses at times, as they can bring different perspectives.

To give another example, using a different object, if one is using a mantra, one may notice that at some point one shifts to being able to stay with mantra clearly and perceive it as an object, which is the first jhana, starting with Mind and Body. Once the mantra is clear, one may notice all sorts of things about the process of mentally creating the mantra, such as the stream of intentions being followed shortly behind by the string of the mantra itself follow slightly behind by the mental echo of the perception of the mantra, making what appear to be three separate streams of the mantra. This is direct insight into Cause and Effect, and as the Three Characteristics of each of these streams become clear, the first jhana matures.

Then the mantra will shift to presenting itself, and will become very clear, as if it is reciting itself. This is obviously the second jhana, and one may experience A&P-like phenomena around here. As the practitioner shifts into the third jhana, the mantra gets wide in the stereo field, complex, with interesting harmonies if one is so inclined, and yet it may seem to be out of phase with attention or it may seem distorted, annoying, like something that was once beautiful has become noisy.

One may experience Dark Night-related phenomena in this phase. As the shift to the fourth jhana comes, the mantra may become part of a very wide, more quite background, as attention becomes inclusive.

Other fourth jhana-like or high equanimity-like phenomena may occur around here.

Thus, the vipassana jhana model can really help people line up experiences across objects, traditions, and practitioners, as they get to the common ground of spiritual terrain in a more fundamental way than the ñanas may, as those with strong concentration abilities may dodge a lot of the emotional side effects that are emphasized by that map, and 224

those using different objects may have such seemingly different pathways. However, now that you know the vipassana jhanas, if you practice well or ask good questions of those you speak with, you should have a much easier time of lining things up and making sense

of things.

Another thing that can help is noticing that each jhana has its smaller aspects that can be classified in a manner different from the ñanas, and here I refer to what Bill labeled the sub-jhanas. As I mentioned on the section on the samatha jhanas, each jhana, vipassana or otherwise, has its sub-phases. Initially, the jhana is new, fresh, clear, but perhaps a bit unsteady as the mind gets used to it (first sub-jhana), then it really comes into its own (second sub-jhana), then the flaws and limits of the jhana are perceived (third sub-jhana), then there is some sort of balanced synthesis of these that at once allows the flaw and begins to incorporate the pull towards that which comes next (fourth sub-jhana).

In this way, it is possible to see models within models within models, and if you practice long and clearly enough with the models in mind you will run into this aspect of things. The warnings about the problems with the models go ten times or more for the sub-jhana models and deeper fractal theories of meditation terrain. They are a largely endless subject whose usefulness is debatable and whose perils are well known.

Consider yourself duly warned!

FRACTALS

Unfortunately, I somehow am not able to keep myself from

presenting just a few of the basics of fractal theory here, particularly as it relates to Bill's model. There is also something exceedingly universal about the pattern that I am about to present, and resonances of it are found back as far as there is recorded human history, religion and art.

If you consider the first 360 degrees of a sine wave (like a rounded capital italic "N" that has been tilted just a bit to the right), you will notice that is starts at zero, goes up in a hill-like way, peaks, descends below where it started in a valley-like way, bottoms out, and then returns to the same level at which it began but yet farther along.

Were one walking on this curve, one would have to make effort to climb up the hill. One would then have a spectacular view and a great sense of accomplishment. One might then try to keep walking up to get more of this, but end up sliding down the other side of the hill, farther 225

down in fact than where one began. And yet, this is still progress, and could even be somewhat thrilling and even effortless with the right attitude. Just when one gets to the very bottom, trapped in the darkest part of the pit, by finally coming to rest at the absolute bottom the upward motion begins to happen naturally, and one returns to where one was, ground zero, and yet farther on at the same time. A

cycle is complete and yet begins again endlessly.

This easily correlates with the first four vipassana jhanas, as well as many other obvious cycles such as those of the sun and seasons, etc. For those trying to correlate the maps of the progress of insight with those of Tantra's Five Buddha Families or those of any number of pagan and nature-based traditions, this should prove most helpful. The first vipassana jhana is climbing up the hill, eager beginnings, hard work, dawn, Spring, East, etc. The second vipassana jhana is the giddy high of accomplishment at the top of the hill, high noon, Summer, South, etc.

The third vipassana jhana is the exhilarating and yet scary fall far down the other side into a cool and shadowy valley, dusk and nightfall, Autumn, West, etc. The fourth vipassana jhana is coming to rest regardless of where one is and returning to one's origin naturally, the cool of the dead of night and early morning, Winter and the promise of Springtime, the coming of a new year at the end of the old, a time of rest, completion and renewal, North. The correlations with the stages of insight are thus obvious. One may also correlate this with some of the models of awakening, particularly the Four Path Model and the Simple Model of awakening, both of which will be explained later.

Interestingly, one may begin to see a full cycle of each of these stages in each of the four vipassana jhanas as well, with each peak and valley adding or subtracting from the position of the greater wave it is an aspect of. For all you incurable model geeks, try plotting $y = \sin(x) + 0.25*\sin(4x)$ from $x = 0$ to 2π on a graphing program. You have my sympathy. The x-axis is the jhanas and sub-jhanas, from 1.1 to 4.4, or 1.1.1 to 4.4.4 if you want to go into sub-sub-jhanas. Unfortunately, what goes on the y-axis would be the subject of a book longer than this one and would read like the most difficult works of Aleister Crowley. In short, the possible complexity of this model is endless and it is no substitute for practice.

Try not to become an arrogant twit like I did when I began to figure all this stuff out. Esoteric map theory won't win you any friends.

I have spent way too much time thinking about the fractals and modeling in my own practice. In my insecure moments, I have

considered showing off and writing a book that detailed the hundreds of little parallels and patterns that I have noticed over the years, how this tiny little stage of some vipassana sub-jhana mirrored or was in inversion of another aspect of some other little stage of some other sub-sub-jhana, but I couldn't come up with any practical use for

it at all. If you do the technique, you will see all of this and more. If not, reading about it won't help you. It's just another content trap, but a seductive one for us pseudo-intellectuals. On the other hand, Khabbala seems to have made related permutations into meditation itself, and those who are particularly inclined to this sort of analysis might want to try taking it as a vehicle for going beyond it. Also, guess where the complex geometric Tibetan Mandalas that are supposed to be pictures of the Mind or the Universe come from? Bingo!

U PANDITA'S MODEL

U Pandita, one of the greatest modern masters of meditation in the Burmese Theravada tradition (see his work In This Very Life) doesn't quite agree with Bill and I about how the ñanas and jhana line up, and so I thought that in the interest of fairness I would present his model .

In his model, as in Bill's model, the first three stages of Mind and Body, Cause and Effect, and The Three Characteristics all fall within the first vipassana jhana. However, he divides the Arising and Passing Away into two jhanas, with the immature phase (when the meditator is still in the grip of the Ten Corruptions of Insight) corresponding to the second jhana and the mature phase (when the meditator sees the true nature of the Ten Corruptions of Insight and crosses the A&P Event) as the third jhana. Everything from Dissolution to Equanimity then falls into the fourth jhana in his model. This does accommodate the vague formless experiences that can happen in Dissolution, as the formless realms come out of the fourth jhana.

The problem with this map is similar to the problem with the other maps, namely that some of the stages of insight tend to suck and the samatha or pure concentration jhanas are always a good time or

peaceful. Thus, to say that the Dark Night stages such as Disgust are part of the fourth jhana just rubs the wrong way somehow, as does saying that Three Characteristics (which also tends to suck a bit) is part of the enjoyable first jhana. The point is that no matter how you slice it, the correlations are not quite perfect, and insight practice is rarely as pleasant as good old concentration practices. That said, there is something to these models anyway, and if you master insight and concentration practices and know a bit of theory, you will see for yourself what they were trying to get at, so get to it!

INKLINGS OF ONE MORE MODEL

The last model is one that is hinted at by the a line in The Vi

suddhimagga when it says that Desire for Deliverance, Re-observation and Equanimity are one. This cryptic phrase may mean

many things.

One of them is that the content of these three stages is likely to be largely the same, while the relationship to it may change dramatically. It could also be used as justification for a third model that put these three together in the fourth jhana. Further, as the fourth vipassana jhana is about equanimity concerning formations, one might presume that one would have had to perceive formations at an earlier stage, such as the previous two, in order to have had the necessary time and experience to come to equanimity concerning them.

Go see for yourself and consider which of these three models presented here fits with your actual experience, or throw this book and all of its models out the window and investigate the Three

Characteristics precisely regardless of what happens! Actually, such decisions might be better made after reading the next chapter…

26.HOW THE MAPS HELP

Now that I have presented the maps of the Progress of Insight, I will reiterate just a bit about how they help and why I went to all of that trouble. I will try to do this in chronological sequence and tie it in with what has been said in Part I.

The maps tell you clearly what you are looking for and explain exactly and precisely why you are looking for it, how that insight helps, and how that insight provides the ground for what follows. The same thing could be said of the concentration state maps. If the stages of insight didn't tend to bring up all sorts of unusual raptures and produce such a wide range of potentially destabilizing emotional side effects, there would not be so much need for the maps. You could simply tell people to increase their perceptual abilities until they got enlightened, and they would likely have few difficulties in doing so by properly applying the techniques. However, the insight stages do tend to cause these sorts of effects, so the maps are very useful for keeping people on track in the face of them.

Remember long ago in the chapter called The Seven Factors of Enlightenment when I mentioned that the first factor was mindfulness and that this was really good for sorting out what is mind and what is body and when each is and isn't there? That is because the first insight you are looking for, the one that gets you in a position to see more deeply, is stage 1. Mind and Body. Get it? This stuff is not random or arbitrary. It is all clearly laid out in a way that helps and fits with reality.

Remember how I said in that chapter that one should try to

experience the intentions that precede actions and thoughts, as well as the mental impression or "consciousness" that follows all

sensations?

That is the understanding in stage 2. Cause and Effect. Thus, mindfulness is the first factor of enlightenment because it leads directly to the first two classic insights into the truth of what is actually going on.

If you want insight into something, then looking into that aspect of things precisely is the best way to acquire that insight.

Once one has directly experienced these two insights, then the Three Characteristics begin to become obvious in stage 3. The Three Characteristics, which is exactly why the next factor of enlightenment is

How the Maps Help

called investigation of the truth, i.e. the Three Characteristics. Both the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and the insight maps tell you exactly what you are trying to understand and why. Their order is not arbitrary in the least.

You will not be able to understand the Three Characteristics directly without sorting out what is mind and what is body and the relationships between them. Without understanding the Three Characteristics, regardless of what you call them, you will not be able to go further and will not be able to get enlightened. The Buddha laid it all out step by step. While this may seem unromantic and perhaps even dry, it is also exceedingly practical and without a doubt the clearest presentation of exactly how to wake up that I have ever seen presented in any spiritual system, just so my biases are made perfectly clear. In short, these maps and techniques can be profoundly empowering.

Once the Three Characteristics begin to become clear, the mind naturally speeds up and becomes more powerful. This is because it finally begins to draw on its tremendous power to see things directly without processing them through thought. Anyone who has driven a car, played a video game or done just about anything else for that matter knows that you just have to do it, but if you tried to think about every little thing you were doing it would be impossible.

This increase in mental power due to non-conceptual and direct experience is related to the third factor of enlightenment, energy.

Energy may now even be blazing up and down one's spinal cord, the mind gets bright and alert, and soon energy is flowing naturally, as one begins to enter the early part of stage 4. The Arising and Passing Away.

Remember how this correlates with the second samatha jhana, where applied and sustained attention or effort are no longer needed? They just happen on their own to a large extent, and energy is naturally present. Thus, it all ties together.

The next factor of enlightenment is rapture, which comes to

predominate in the second vipassana jhana and the Arising and Passing Away just as it does in the second samatha jhana. Thus, all of the important advice about rapture given earlier applies to the insight maps in Part III. One is generally advised to avoid becoming a rapture or Kundalini-junkie in that stage, although I suppose if that is your primary 230

reason for meditating, it is certainly your right to do so. Just be wary of the inevitable crash.

During the mature Arising and Passing Away, as well as in

Dissolution, tranquility becomes important and more pronounced, but then becomes too strong in late Dissolution. Thus, it becomes important to build the sixth factor of enlightenment, concentration.

Finally, when the Dark Night really kicks in, as it will once one can again find one's objects and stay with them (Fear through Re-observation), then Equanimity in the face of all experience becomes vital for progress, as stated in Part I. Thus, Equanimity can arise and that Path can be attained.

As mentioned before, the maps fill in the seemingly huge, frustrating and nebulous gap from doing something like sitting on a cushion paying attention to the sensations of your breath and finally getting enlightened.

The maps also tell you exactly what the common errors of each stage are. They warn people about not getting stuck in 1. Mind and Body by solidifying it into a jhanic state, which it closely resembles.

They provide comfort and explanation when things might get jerky, unpleasant or even downright painful in the stage 3. Three

Characteristics. They admonish people not to get too fascinated with how much of a mighty meditator they might feel like in the stage of the 4. Arising and Passing Away, and to even examine the sensations that make up the seemingly wondrous and tantalizing corruptions of insight such as equanimity and rapture. They warn of the possibility of thinking that one is enlightened when going though that stage, as well as saying that it is normal for wild and sometimes explosive experiences to occur.

I spoke with a friend who basically wanted me to help him

rationalize that his recent A&P experiences occasionally allowed him to touch High Equanimity. My advice was that a much more helpful form of inquiry would be to notice the sensations of fascination with this issue and the sensations of the rest of his sensate universe come and go moment to moment. If he couldn’t manage this, he should be putting his time into trying to figure out how to get together enough vacation time and money to do another long retreat

and/or how to increase his daily practice time and the thoroughness of his investigation.

The maps clearly state that the process is not a particularly linear one, and that after the highs of the Arising and Passing Away there usually follows times of difficulty when all of the spectacular power of the mind and the enjoyment of meditation gained in the Arising and Passing Away is likely to fade dramatically. They warn of the numerous difficulties that may or may not be faced in the Dark Night, as well as provide lots of information about how to deal with them. The most common mistake is failing to investigate the truth of sensations deemed undesirable. It is hard to get on more intimate terms with reality when we feel a bit too emotional, vulnerable, openhearted or shaken, and so progress in the Dark Night is not always easy.

While I do generally wish to avoid biting the hands that have fed me, I must say that not telling students about this territory from the beginning so as to give them a heads up to what might happen is so extremely irresponsible and negligent that I just want to spit and scream at those who perpetuate this warped culture of secrecy. While many teachers may not do so because they don't think many people will ever get this far, that in and of itself is a scary assumption that should cause some serious questioning of their teaching methods, techniques, and perhaps even motivations.

Imagine that there is a meditation medication called Damnitall that is used to treat some form of suffering (perhaps it's a pain medicine or an anti-depressant). However, in a subset of patients its long-term use is known to cause pronounced of anxiety, paranoia, depression, apathy, micro-psychotic episodes, a pervasive sense of primal frustration, pronounced lack of perspective on relationships, reduced libido, feelings of dissatisfaction with worldly affairs, and exacerbation of personality disorders, all of which can lead to markedly reduced social and occupational function. Imagine that these side effects are known to persist sometimes months and even years after someone stops taking the medication, with occasional flare-ups and relapses, with the only permanently effective treatment being to increase the dose, along with supportive care and counseling, and hope that these side effects pass quickly with little damage.

Now, imagine that you are living in the dark days of paternalistic medicine during which doctors are prescribing this stuff without fully

disclosing the potential side effects despite the fact that they are

fully aware of them. Imagine that drug companies are not forced to disclose known side effects. Does anything in this scenario make you a bit uncomfortable? I should hope so!

Let's say for the sake of argument that I am a fanatic who is blowing this thing way out of proportion. Let's assume that Damnitall only causes these effects in 1 out of every 10,000 patients. Would you have these side effects included on the little piece of paper that comes in the bottle? Lets say it's 1 in a 100? At what point does it become absurd that those doctors and drug companies are being allowed to get away with this? Unfortunately, I must admit that I do not know the exact odds of these side effects happening to you. I do know firsthand that they happen and that if you cross the A&P Event you are fairly likely to run into at least some of them.

These side effects are no fantasy. When they show up they are as real and powerful as if some dangerous drug had seriously skewed your neurochemistry, and I often wonder if that might be something like what happens. Thus, it seems only fair to have the same standards that we apply with such pronounced zeal and fervent litigation to drug companies and doctors also apply to meditation teachers and dharma books. For reasons unknown to me, this book is the first one I know of to spell out all of these things explicitly in language that everyone should be able to understand so that you can go into meditation having been fully informed of the risks and benefits and thus make informed decisions about your own practice. In the spirit of professionalism, I call on others who promote the dharma to adopt a similarly high standard for their own work.

Maps point out that people might be able to get stuck for a little while in Equanimity if they do not investigate the sensations that make up even equanimity, peace, relief, expectation, confidence, etc. The models also go into great detail about what actually happens in each stage of enlightenment and what does not happen (presented later), though this aspect of the maps is much more controversial than the maps of the progress of insight.

Thus, the maps at their best tell the meditator in clear and systematic ways exactly what to do, what to look for, why, and exactly 233

how not to screw up at each stage. They are no substitute for clear practice and investigation of the sensations that make up one's experience, and they are poor aids to those who refuse to heed them and follow their advice. As I continue to mention, they can also be used as a basis for useless and even harmful competition between gung ho meditators with insecurity issues. It can and has been argued convincingly that one certainly doesn't need to know these maps at all

so long as one practices well. Despite the dangers of competition and over-intellectualization, the maps still have tremendous value when used as they were meant to be.

One very valid criticism of the maps, as I mentioned before, is that people are often very susceptible to suggestion, often called "scripting."

Describing these stages can cause people to have something that resembles these experiences just because they have been told that they are expected. The part of the maps that deals with emotional side effects is notorious for causing this particular kind of mimicry. For example, it is basically impossible to sort out what is just fear and what is insight stage 6 (Fear) based upon the presence of fear alone. The aspect of the maps that deals with unusual raptures (both physical and mental) is less suggestible, and is a more reliable indicator of the stage of practice.

However, the fundamental increases and shifts in perceptual

thresholds are extremely hard to fake, particularly if you have access to a map that goes into the extensive details presented here. Shifts in perceptual thresholds are the most reliable markers on the path of insight, the Gold Standard by which these stages are defined. For example, if you recently saw very fine vibrations that changed frequency with the breath, then had a big zap-through, spaced out for a while, and now feel paranoid with some steady 5-7 Hz stuff that quickly leads to chaotic, edgy vibrations with complex harmonics, that's very likely the insight stage Fear.

Thus, increasing one's perceptual thresholds in terms of speed, consistency, and inclusiveness should always be the focus of one's insight practices. Skilled teachers who use and are very good with these maps will take into account all three, i.e. emotions, raptures and perceptual abilities, along with the pattern of these that has unfolded previously, and use these to come up with an educated guess as to what 234

How the Maps Help

is going on with a student. With years of experience, we may eventually get good at doing this for ourselves. I have found that my guesses about my own practice are usually more accurate after I have had a year or two to reflect on what has occurred.

The best, most consistent practice I ever did was during a two-week Mahasi Sayadaw-style retreat in Malaysia. This was my third retreat ever, and I knew nothing whatsoever of the maps of the progress of insight, very little theory, and had done almost no reading of the old texts. I was simply doing noting practice. I had been told by a friend that if I noted quickly and accurately all day long from the time I got up until the time I went to sleep without breaks then good

things would happen. Well, from my point of view, all sorts of strange and largely irritating things happened. However, I just kept noting quickly all day long regardless.

Things were getting pretty wild, then things calmed down a bit, and finally I hit a wall. I could barely practice at all. I would sit down and try to note and be walking away from the cushion within a minute and before I realized what was happening. My mind was so tight, irritated and buzzy that I felt I would soon explode. It was immensely frustrating.

That night the abbot played a scratchy old tape of a Burmese monk with a thick accent describing the stages of insight. It blew my mind, as he described exactly what I had gone through in the previous 13 days. I could clearly see how the stages he was describing had unfolded, exactly where I was and what I had to do. I was also astounded that the path could be so reproducible and straightforward, that I could just follow moronically simple instructions and have it all happen. Those who want to get lost in the reaction, “No, it isn’t so simple. Awakening is a great and intractable mystery! You are lying! It mustn’t be so!” should take a few moments to seriously question exactly how this disempowering and inaccurate view helps them feel good about themselves. They should then take a few moments to find another, more empowering view that helps them feel good about themselves, step up to the plate, and hit a home run.

With a very high level of faith in the technique and despite the extremely irritating restlessness that arose the moment I sat down, I resolved to sit on the cushion until I had passed Re-observation. It was horrible. I noted like crazy anyway. Within five minutes it broke, 235

How the Maps Help

everything opened up, and fundamental formations arose. Thus, knowledge of these maps is absolutely not necessary for progress but it may be helpful if it keeps one practicing and helps one realize that what is happening may be perfectly normal.

Unfortunately, the story continues on a dark note. I did not know these maps well at the time. I didn’t really appreciate what was happening, how close I was to a real breakthrough, and the possible implications of not doing so. The retreat ended one hour later, and I had very little time for practice when my rigorous travels resumed. I fell back, back into the Dark Night, and it began to really screw up my life. I won’t go into details, but I will say that I wish I had access to a friend with a solid understanding of these maps to help me keep what I was going through in perspective. As it was, I was largely blindsided. Since then I have met numerous people in similar unfortunate situations. The wish to help others avoid such difficult situations was one of my primary motivations for writing this book.

It was another six months before I went on retreat again, and luckily by that point I wanted nothing in the world more than release. In the month before I arrived, I was lucky enough to have a friend clearly explain the importance of noticing impermanence at a very fine level and show me some of the finer points of the maps. I hit the retreat determined to practice to the very best of my ability or die trying.

I powered up above the Arising and Passing Away again on day 3, hit the Dark Night on day 4, faltered for a few hours, and then simply noted. I knew I was beaten, but I noted. I was weary, tight and yet volatile, and I noted. I felt I was cracking at the seams, but I noted. I stayed with what was happening, clearly perceiving and reluctantly accepting the sensations that made up my world, the weight lifted, and then the little mush demon buddha thing showed up. Soon thereafter, I soared effortlessly in realms of pure vibrating suchness, free from the ordinary cares of the world. Soon this became boring, and then I just sat and walked. On day 6 of my fourth retreat, I got the first taste of what I was looking for (read, “stream entry”). There is no way to explain the waves of gratitude that washed over me, except that one small ripple of them was the other part of the motivation for writing this book.

As promised, the spiritual path is not a linear one. During the next few days, I swung wide from the greatest spiritual highs to the extremes of what can happen during Re-observation. My mind was powerful beyond reason, and yet I was a complete novice at this new territory. I was a bit like a 16-year-old who has just been given a Ferrari with no brakes and a pair of night vision goggles. I simultaneously saw myself as being staggeringly wise and also as a complete basket case. For the remainder of the retreat, I worked to stabilize, ground and regroup so that when the retreat ended I wouldn’t make a complete mess of things.

I was only moderately successful.

For the next few weeks, I, The Great Stream Enterer, managed to alienate most of the people who had the misfortune to speak with me for any length of time. Worse, within four weeks I began experiencing the difficult physical raptures of the next set of early insight stages. New territory was showing up, probably because I was still practicing hard three or more hours each day, and it was kicking my gung–ho butt. My neck went so stiff in the next 3rd insight stage that I could barely move my head for nine days, and the pain was excruciating. Again, I had no idea what was happening. Many years later, I have come to the conclusion that the best thing to do after attaining a path

is to chill out for a while. I did have a senior teacher tell me that much, but he didn't tell me why. Further, I had been advised by a good friend to do otherwise. Lord, help us when meditation teachers give us blatantly contradictory instructions, particularly in intensive practice situations.

No one had told me that the beginning of a new progress of insight could arise so quickly, or informed me of what it could be like to be trapped in the odd in-between stages by pushing too hard. Again, I wished I had the advantage of knowing someone who was willing to talk about these things honestly. However, despite my continued contact with senior meditation teachers, no one was willing to lay out the practical information that I present here. I had to figure it out the hard way. Was I bitter? You bet I was. Was I simultaneously very grateful to even have these things to be bitter about? Absolutely. Finally, someone gave me the excellent advice, "Nail down what you've got." Within a few weeks of relaxing and letting things settle, I was able to backslide to mastery of the previous stages and get on with my life.

How the Maps Help

Despite these rough beginnings and a rough journey beyond them, do I have any major regrets? No. It has been so very beneficial that I cannot possibly explain it. I wouldn't be going on and on about these things if they weren't worth it. However, I am a firm believer that if there is enough good information out there, then it doesn't have to be so hard for those that follow. Thus, I present these maps with the hope that they will help people at least have some framework to help them understand the many and varied parts of the path.

Further, as absurd as this may sound to some, the maps allow you to plan your spiritual path to some degree. True, there are ultimate points of view that would make this perspective seem quite ridiculous, but indulge me. A sample plan might be this:

1. Go on a three-week retreat and really power the mindfulness and investigation all day long, consistently stretching your perceptual threshold and speed of investigation to its limits to maximize the chances of crossing the A&P Event. It is not that hard to cross the A&P with fairly imbalanced effort, so don't worry about that.

Remember not to be freaked out by the strange raptures around the A&P. Note, a two to three month retreat would give you a great shot at stream entry if you are ready to really practice, so if you are at that level, go for it.

2. Once you have crossed the A&P, Dark Night stuff will come bubbling up soon enough, and the choice to deal with this on or off retreat will depend upon how much time you can devote to retreats

and how much intensity you can stand. My vote tends to be for on retreat if you can take the heat, but not everyone can the first time around and not everyone can easily spare the time. On the other hand, that Dark Night might just be a cakewalk. Give it a go and find out! In the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition, they typically think that two to three months of diligent noting practice on intensive retreat is enough to get many people to stream entry, but perhaps you do not have the time or dedication to step to that level yet.

3. If you decide to deal with the Dark Night off retreat, realize that you will likely fall back but keep practicing an hour or two each day. Do your very best to realize that any of the odd feelings that you may experience are probably just Dark Night side effects. Try to imitate 238

normal life as best you can and avoid rash decisions such as sudden and permanent renunciations of things you will want later on. Try to be nice to people and do your very best to keep your “stuff” from bleeding onto those around you. Find ways to honor and deal with your stuff that don’t involve projecting it out onto other people or making a mess of your life.

4. If on retreat, or the next time you can go on retreat, just keep practicing as consistently and accurately as you can and avoid indulging in the content of your stuff at all costs. Put worldly concerns behind you for that period of time and investigate bare sensations with acceptance and bravery.

5. Attain to equanimity regarding whatever arises, but be wary of indifference. This is not always as easy as it sounds, but it could be strangely easy nonetheless. Once the weight lifts, just keep sitting or walking or whatever, with no sense of special effort. After really getting into high equanimity, stream entry should arise soon enough; if it doesn’t, repeat the above cycles until it does.

6. From this point, you are “in there,” and progress of some kind is now inevitable. This first finger-hold on ultimate reality is extremely important, as without it you can wander far and wide and yet get nowhere. Advice for what to do next is given later on.

27.THE THREE DOORS

Insight practice is all about understanding the Three Characteristics

so that when we deeply understand them we may see beyond the three illusions and enter ultimate reality through one of the Three Doors.

Stages 12-14 and subsequent attainments of Fruition at that level

of awakening present as radical and complete understandings of the Three Characteristics at the level of formations, i.e. at the level of the whole sensate universe, lasting three or four moments of one tenth to one quarter of a second each. As unpalatable as the Three Characteristics can seem, in the end they are the source and substance of our complete salvation.

There are three basic ways the doors may present themselves, which I will describe shortly, at least two of which are combined to produce the experience of entering ultimate reality. The third characteristic is considered inferred from the way the other two present, but sometimes aspects of that third characteristic will be experienced directly.

Regardless of the way that door manifests, there are some common characteristics of doors that point to something beyond all of this. They reveal something completely extraordinary about the relationship between “the watcher” and “the watched” that it would take a very warped view of the universe to explain, though I will try shortly. One way or another, these fleeting experiences cannot be explained in terms of our normal, four-dimensional experience of space and time, or within our ordinary experience of a subject and object.

One way to sort out a door to ultimate reality from an A&P Event is that the Three Doors involve the whole experiential space-time continuum as well as the object of investigation, as these become the same thing, an integrated whole. This does not hold absolutely for A&P

Events if we are being honest with ourselves, as the subtle background of sensations that provide reference points is not completely included.

Further, A&P Events tend to be very rich and thick, whereas there is always a sort of silent and luminous transparency to the way the Three Doors present. As stated earlier, the A&P Event occurs very much as the Three Doors, is then followed by an unknowing event, but then there are a few moments (usually about 3 or 4) as the breath drops all

The Three Doors

the way to the bottom, followed by another unknowing event and a state shift.

Without doubt, the clearest and most illuminating experiences of the Three Doors come from attaining Fruition in the formless realms or in the realms of the “psychic powers,” though these are not necessary, just very interesting, memorable and educational. Another perspective would say that the Three Doors always happen at the level of the psychic powers, but this is a matter of semantics. The strength

of one's concentration practice and the recent continuity of practice will also help determine how clear these experiences are. I had to go through them hundreds of times with an eye to exactly how they presented before I was able to write a chapter such as this one. The entrance to Fruition through one of these doors is always completely unexpected.

I will explain the aspect that each characteristic lends to each door and then combine these to explain what actually happens. When particularly clear experiences of the three quick moments of the Three Doors occur, they can provide fundamental clues that can be used for further debunking the Three Illusions, as well as explaining where so many of the teachings that try to describe the true nature of things come from.

For instance, the impermanence door aspect has to do with mind moments (the particle model), arising and passing, vibrations, understanding that from which all this arises and that to which all this returns, understanding the source of all reality, the universe strobing in and out of existence, and that sort of thing. When the Tibetans talk of non-existence, they refer to the fact that all experience is utterly transient (the wave model) and thus abides or exists not at all but is constantly in absolute flux and ephemeral. The impermanence door aspect relates to realizing what is “between the frames” of the sensate universe (formations), and it tends to have a “dat.dat.dat-(gone)!” quality to it.

The suffering door aspect has to do with fundamental attachment, dropping attachment like a hot coal that one finally realized one was holding, really letting go, compassion, ultimate bodhichitta, the true love of God, being purged in the flames, renunciation, relinquishment, feeling the fundamental queasy tension in the illusion of duality for just a bit longer than one ever would normally, and that sort of thing. The 241

suffering door relates directly to “the mind” releasing its fixated hold on the whole of relative reality and allowing it to fall away, leaving

“awareness” to discover itself. Remember, these words in quotes do not refer to fixed phenomena or experiences. It can also feel like the sum total of existence is suddenly ripped away from us. The suffering door aspect tends to be the most unsettling or wrenching of the Three Doors, the most death-like.

The no-self or emptiness door aspect has to do with the teachings on the mirror-like nature of the mind, the Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters (that oh so mystical and overlooked line from Genesis 1.2), God making man in his image, merging with a tantric

image of a buddha, seeing one's Original Face, thinking of who created thought, and that sort of thing. It relates to directly observing the collapse of the illusion of duality, the collapse of awareness into the intelligence or cognition of the perceived. It is a bit like staring back at yourself (or something intelligent regardless of whether or not it looks like you) with no one on this side to be stared at and then collapsing into that image. The emptiness door aspect tends to be the most pleasant, easy and visually interesting of the three.

Each of these doors has to do with complete understanding of the ultimate aspect of relative reality, and thus realizing the ultimate nature of ultimate reality. Each door also relates in some way to completely countering one of the three fundamental defilements. The

impermanence door relates to countering fundamental ignorance. The suffering door relates to countering fundamental attachment. The emptiness door relates to countering fundamental aversion. From a True Self point of view, the impermanence door relates to the permanence of ultimate reality, the suffering door relates to the compassionate nature of ultimate reality or ultimate bodhichitta, and emptiness door relates to the fact that The Void is “what” we truly are (in True Self parlance at least).

When I use the word “fundamental,” I always mean something to do with basic illusions of duality or the gradual or sudden elimination thereof. Thus, I use the word “fundamental” when what I am talking about has nothing to do with specific content, emotions, physical 242

sensations, mind states, psychological manifestations or understandings, or any other specific and limited categories of sensations.

I will now try to describe six possible combinations of these three aspects that create the actual experiences of the three doors. While there can be quite a lot of variation in the specifics of how these doors present, they will always fall into one of these basic patterns. As I stated earlier, these events are so brief and sometimes so unclear that persons who have been through them many times may not understand that they present in the way I describe them here.

When the impermanence aspect predominates and is combined

with the emptiness aspect, then the whole universe strobes three times quickly with something staring back at us as a minor aspect of that universe, and then it seems that awareness collapses into the space after the third gap, perhaps turning slightly towards the thing that was staring back. When the impermanence aspect predominates and is combined with the suffering aspect, then the three strobing moments feel wrenching, and the plunge into the gap feels fundamentally violating, like exactly the wrong thing to do.

When the emptiness aspect predominates and is combined with the impermanence door, there are three clear and discrete moments of moving towards or sideways to (or perhaps focusing on) an intelligent seeing image staring back at us, except that there is nothing on this side.

After the third moment, the illusion collapses in a very natural and pleasant way. When the emptiness door predominates with suffering as its second aspect, then a very strange thing happens. There is an image on one side staring back, and then the universe becomes a toroid (doughnut), and the image and this side of the toroid change places as the toroid universe spins. The spinning includes the whole background of space in all directions. Fruition occurs when the two have changed places and the whole thing vanishes.

When the suffering aspect predominates and is combined with the emptiness aspect, again, the toroid thing happens, except that it can be a quite distorted or cone-like. The universe can rotate up or down and away from us, so that the primary experience is of an image falling from this side, though with the hint that it might be coming back around to this side. When the suffering door aspect predominates with

impermanence present, then the three moments in which the universe is ripped away from us are distinct. When the suffering door predominates, the experience is always a bit creepy.

For those working on the higher paths, reflecting on the ways that the few moments before fruition have presented themselves can be very interesting and helpful. For those working on the last stage of awakening, I offer the following advice. The special ways that the doors can present can seem to imply the following:

•

That there is a link between some special and intelligent spot on that side and some transcendent this that is unfindable. This is implied by the definable qualities of that spot and certain subtle sensations implying space.

•

That there is some space around space, some transcendent

super-space around the universe that we may try to rest in or imagine is here. This is implied by sensations with definable qualities.

•

That there is some void-like potential that creates all of this and to which all of this returns. This is implied by sensations with specific and definable qualities.

Seeing that these qualities that seemed to imply something very special are actually just more qualities that we have misinterpreted as being a potential refuge reveals the refugeless refuge. Reflecting and investigating in this way, the last illusions may fall away and we may attain to the complete elimination of all fundamental illusions, or at least the next level of the fractal.

28.“WAS THAT EMPTINESS?”

Welcome to the world of models, states, stages, and visions of goals to attain. The curse and blessing of knowing all of this terminology and theory is that there is a natural tendency to begin to try to apply it to our own experiences (and those of others) and wonder what was what.

Beyond that, not only have I just provided enough information for a few of you to become Master Posers on the spiritual path, I have just given some of you enough information to start obsessing way too much about

“where you are” on the path. However, this is a trivial danger, and why senior dharma teachers do not ever seem to put the important details about sorting out what is what into their books is completely beyond me. That it should be left to a young and cocky upstart like myself to fill in this gap is less than ideal. Note, when I use the word “emptiness” in the title of this chapter, I am using it specifically to refer to a Fruition, and in this case generally mean stream entry, and not any other meaning. It has many other meanings, but this is the specific one I care about at this moment.

There are all sorts of pitfalls that can occur, but perhaps the most significant of them all is calling experiences “emptiness,” “Fruition”,

“Stream Entry” or “Nirvana” that simply weren’t. It is a mistake that we are all likely to make more than once if we practice fairly well, know these models and care about them in the least, and even very enlightened beings with years of practice will sometimes wonder, “Was that emptiness?”, meaning “Was that my hit?”, or “Was that the next stage of awakening?”. Some of us will be particularly prone to blowing this on a regular basis even if we are actually somewhat enlightened.

Take heart, failure can be a great teacher.

The first and perhaps most important point is that from a certain point of view it is not an important question. If you have actually gotten enlightened to some degree or attained a Fruition, the permanent benefits of that have occurred regardless of whether or not you are certain about it. On the other hand, if you haven’t gotten enlightened but think that you have, it is worth being able to come

back to reality.

The range of clarity with which the Three Doors to Fruition present themselves can be quite wide. Sometimes, even if it was actually the

"Was That Emptiness?"

attainment of Fruition, there may not have been enough clarity at the time for one's memory of the way that particular door presented and of the depth of the discontinuity to be clear enough to satisfactorily answer the question.

There are also a large number of possible momentary unknowing experiences that can present in ways that seem convincingly like the attainment of Fruition, even for meditators with years of experience with these issues. I will mention some of the most common events that can be mistaken for Fruition here, though this is far from being a complete list.

Momentary experiences of the formless realms that arise in the insight stage of 11. Equanimity, particularly nothingness and neither perception nor yet non-perception, are common culprits. However, if one is this close, the real thing is very likely to occur sooner or later.

Formless experiences arising from pure concentration practices have fooled people for millennia into thinking they were Fruitions. As mentioned earlier, insight stage 4. The Arising and Passing Away, particularly the Arising and Passing Away Event itself, is a pernicious trickster and has fooled countless practitioners throughout the ages into thinking it was Fruition or the attainment of a path. This may even fool somewhat enlightened beings who are working on the next path. Note, the A&P Event typically shows up only once per path unless a long period of time goes by without practice after it, whereas Fruition is likely to be repeated naturally.

Unusually heavy experiences of insight stage 5. Dissolution can be formless and murky enough to fool some meditators on occasion, as can any really dramatic shift between any of the vipassana or samatha jhanas (as these involve three or four "impulsions" or "mind moments"

followed by a momentary unknowing experience; see The

Abhidhamma in the Pali Canon). Even the first shift into insight stage 1.

Mind and Body can fool some novices if is happens dramatically enough and they get fascinated with how unitive, pleasant and clear the stage can be after the first shift into it.

Often it is not possible to make a clear call about what was what, even if it was actually Fruition. While what follows is routinely considered to be dangerous information, I am happy to go to the far

extreme of telling largely taboo secrets if it helps to balance the pervasive “mushroom” culture. These are some basic guidelines that may be used when trying to answer the question, “Was that emptiness?”:

•

If there was any sense of an experience, even of nothingness or something that seemed incomprehensible, particularly anything involving the vaguest hint of the passage of time during it, write it off as something other than emptiness. This is an absolute rule.

•

Similarly, if there was any sense of a this observing a that, or a self of any sort that was actually present for whatever happened, write it off as something other than emptiness. If you were there, that wasn’t it.

•

If there was not a complete sense of discontinuity and if it makes any sense to think of time, space, perspective or memory continuing across the gap, write it off immediately as something other than emptiness. On the other hand, if the only way to remember what happed involves remembering just forward to the end of the particular door that presented and then remembering back to when reality reappeared, well, keep reading.

•

If on continued repetition of the unknowing event over days or weeks it fails the above tests, write it off as something other than emptiness.

•

If continued repetition of that particular kind of unknowing event over days or weeks fails to give any clear experiences of the Three Doors and to reveal something very paradoxical and profound about the nature of subject and object, be skeptical.

•

If there was a double-dip into unknowing events with a few profound moments of clarity and altered experience between them, as is characteristic of the A&P Event, with one shift happening halfway down the out-breath and a second shift at the end of that out-breath, write it off immediately as more likely having been that or maybe the early stages of Equanimity.

•

If the event cannot be repeated, write it off. Those who have attained a path will attain more Fruitions naturally, maybe one to many per day, as they basically can't help but cycle.

•

If there is not a rather predictable pattern of stages and perspective shifts that begins to become clear (specifically following the course 247

of the progress of insight listed above in some way, particularly as regards shifts in perceptual thresholds), write it off as something other than emptiness.

This brings me to the Cardinal Rule when trying to sort out what all experiences or attainments actually were: try to repeat it again and again and be honest with yourself. It literally took me many of thousands of times through these cycles and experiences at many levels and over many years to get to the point where I could even begin to think about writing a book like this one. I am still quite cautious about hanging my hat on interpretations of my experiences or what seem to be non-experiences until I have attained them 50, 100 or even more times. If you don't have the necessary level of clarity and mastery to repeat the experience of interest again and again, either do enough clear and diligent practice to attain the required mastery or don't ask the question.

Studying theory can only be so useful for this. In the end and always, it is practice and continued direct experience that reveals and clarifies.

While it is somewhat true that with clarity comes mystery, this maxim can easily be used as a cop out.

A related question is, "Am I enlightened?" I have met a number of people recently who have exhibited a common but unhealthy

fascination with this question, toying with the possibility that they were enlightened in "past lives" (whatever), were enlightened earlier in their life and "repressed it" (not!), were enlightened by interesting experiences that were bound up in time and space (whoops!), such as A&P Events, formless realm experiences, visions of beings, unusual raptures, etc. For these sorts of people, as well as those working on higher paths who are stuck in the in-between stages, I offer the following:

The first thing one must know about enlightened beings is that Fruitions occur for them, and they do so naturally and fairly often.

True, there may sometimes be an initial period after first attaining a path when they might not happen so often (the range being from once every day to once every week or so at the very longest). However, Fruitions are largely unavoidable. It would take lots of consistent work to keep them from happening, and if one let one's guard down they would show up again quickly enough. In fact, the longer one goes 248

without a Fruition, the more the pull towards that which is not any of this intensifies.

Even those who are working on the next path will typically have recurring Fruitions from the current path sneak in even if they don't want them to. This is one way to distinguish A&P Events from Fruitions, as crossing above the level of the A&P quickly diminishes in intensity, fades quickly as the focus of one's practice, and fails to provide the consistent sense of release, ease and sense of well-being that attaining a Fruition does.

Before enlightenment, one always had to developing access

concentration, attaining Mind and Body and working from there every time they meditated (unless practicing very strongly, often and well, when one may be able to keep up enough momentum to avoid falling back to the beginning). After attaining a path one begins at the level of the Arising and Passing Away and proceeds with much more skill and confidence. Simply reflecting on reality even slightly will result in a nearly instantaneous shift to a Mind and Body-like state. At a whim, one can begin meditating at the level of the A&P, beginning with the double-dip state shift at the middle and then end of the out breath that is the hallmark of that stage. Thus, enlightened beings can perceive vibrating phenomena at a whim.

In that same vein, the cycles of insight from stage 4 to 11 and then 15 always influence the conscious life of those who are enlightened.

They are inescapable. They cycle endlessly in one's waking hours and even when dreaming. They subtly or overtly color one's mood, energy level and perception of the world. As soon as a Fruition is attained, the cycle starts again and proceeds, though the timing and obviousness of this fact may be somewhat variable depending on how much one is practicing, what is going on in one's life and how good one is at noticing the qualities of these stages. Even when doing concentration practices, these cycles are in the background somewhere. It is possible to ignore them to a large degree for a while when in deep samatha jhanas, though it takes work to do so.

I remember lying down to take a nap after lunch when on retreat in India a few days after my first Fruition. Before I knew it, meditation was occurring. The cycles were showing themselves in order without any 249

"Was That Emptiness?"

effort or even invitation. They had their individual qualities much as I have explained above, though they move fairly quickly from one to the other, and about 45 minutes later Fruition occurred. Soon thereafter, it was obvious that the cycle had started again.

Do you cycle naturally through the cycles of insight from stage

four to eleven and then attain Fruition? If you just sat down on a cushion and did nothing special, would you move through these stages as easily as falling down a hill? Do Fruitions arise after such cycles in a way that fairly consistently leaves you with the staggering impression that, “that was it!”? If not, I would avoid harboring any notions that you are enlightened, “have been enlightened some time in the past,” etc., as you are almost certainly in error. Such notions are not helpful most of the time anyway, and tend to be bound up in a sense of solidity and imagined continuity of self that is simply unrealistic.

I have a friend who erroneously thinks he is enlightened and once said, “Oh, yes, I went through those stages once many years ago, but now I am beyond them.” Toast! Those who are enlightened go through these stages hundreds if not thousands of times each year. There is absolutely no getting around them barring deep sleep, severe brain damage, strong sedation or death.

However, it is fair to mention that some enlightened people simply don’t think about things in this way, have never noticed that they cycled, never picked up on the patterns, were never exposed to the maps, don’t have particularly strong concentration, don’t realize how they got there, are not particularly intellectual or, if they are, never applied their intellect to these aspects of where theory meets practice, never really paid attention to the way things unfold, and couldn’t care less. Thus, if someone is enlightened, I brazenly assert they cycle like this, but that doesn’t mean they realize they do, and if their practice unfolded gently or slowly or without very intense concentration and a map-oriented focus, they may have no idea about most of the things I am discussing here and yet they apply to them anyway. I poured massive amounts of energy into my practice, developed very strong concentration, and care about the maps obsessively, but that doesn’t mean that other beings who are enlightened did or do.

250

“Was That Emptiness?”

Back to describing the cycles. As Review sets in, it can seem that one can control these cycles and stages. It may seem after we have mastered a path somewhat that we can call insight stages up in order and stay in them as long as we wish or even call them up out of order. From one point of view, enlightened beings can master and manipulate the stages of insight, though such practices can take on much more of a samatha feel than an insight feel. From another point of view, perhaps a more thoroughly insight-oriented point of view, even such a notion is erroneous. Stages, cycles, and the empty intentions to manipulate them occur in a causal fashion, and if there is

a sense that there is an independent self that is controlling them, then there is obviously more work to do. Now, there's a high standard, and worthy standard, indeed!

These cycles, as with everything else, simply belong to the nature of things.

29.BEYOND FIRST PATH ("WHAT NEXT?")

Obviously, it can be easy for a meditator to think that they have completed a progress of insight and gotten stream entry when in fact they haven't. It is also possible for a meditator to have actually completed a progress of insight and yet think otherwise, but this is much less common. Sometimes a student will be correct in thinking that they have, but their teachers will remain unconvinced. Sometimes a teacher may think that the student has and yet be wrong. Regardless, just keep practicing and see what happens. This is the most fundamental principle for all of these stages. A particularly useful and traditional guideline is to wait a year and a day before completely making up your mind. This is slippery stuff sometimes, and many states and stages can easily fool a student or teacher into thinking that they are something they are not.

When a meditator successfully completes a progress of insight, they have permanently debunked certain illusions to some degree, but many remain. These tend to include a new fascination with the understanding that has arisen from that path. However, if one's "realization" doesn't stand to the test of time, or if there is not some sort of fundamental and unalterable reduction in suffering, write it off and keep going. Even if one does complete a progress of insight, is easy to imagine that more has been debunked than actually has, so continue to practice training in morality throughout your life as before to avoid being bitten by those unskillful potentials that remain but are hidden. Strangely, the temptations to screw up can become more subtle and seductive as practice deepens. These tend to be at their worst around the next Arising and Passing Away or during the next Re-observation.

An extended series of progresses of insight tend to proceed as follows. They may be called "Paths" in the Theravada and "Bhumis" in the Tibetan, though there are some problems that arise in trying to resolve the inconsistencies in these two models that will be touched on a bit later. Thus, a more general treatment follows, and the descriptions of the stages here are not taken directly from any particular tradition. From one point of view, all of this is not necessary information, as continued practice just as before will continue to move things along quite naturally.

On the other hand, if one has expectations about what might come next

Beyond First Path (“What Next?”)

that are not in accord with reality or interfere with practice, then this information might be helpful.

The meditator masters this stage of awakening by continued practice as before. They can quickly learn to rise through all of the stages, starting from the Arising and Passing Away, through the Dark Night, up to Equanimity and Fruition in a single sitting or even during some of the activities of daily life. Merely sitting down on a cushion, or being awake for that matter, will involve naturally moving through these cycles, thought the speed and clarity of these can vary widely depending on the practitioner and circumstances. They may even find it interesting to purposefully hang out in some of the stages of the Dark Night just to learn more about them and from them, as they have some very

important lessons to teach and are very interesting territory. However, they may also come to realize that this is really just a new beginning in some ways, sort of like graduating from high school but then becoming a lowly freshman in college.

The period after completing a progress of insight and after gaining some strong sense of mastery of its stages is also a great time to work on one’s concentration practice abilities. The reason for waiting is that concentration practices and insight practices tend to have a certain inertia to them. If you have recently been trying to get into really stable samatha states, this can make it harder to see things flicker for a while. If you have recently been training hard to see things flicker, it can be hard to get into really stable samatha jhanas. Thus, what you don’t want to do is to gunk up the natural mastery phase of your practice until you are comfortable enough with these stages to get stuck in one and not have it be a big deal. This usually takes at least a few weeks, but this is a very crude guideline, and everyone is different regarding issues of timing.

Judge for yourself how well you handle stages such as Re-observation and decide if you would be alright if you got stuck in it for a few hours.

The time after gaining some mastery of these stages is also a great time to work on one’s stuff. Actually, doing concentration practices and working on one’s stuff go very well together, as concentration states tend to cause our stuff to come bubbling to the surface where we can work with it. The time during a mastery phase is also a great time to make 253

Beyond First Path (“What Next?”)

sure that one’s daily life is functioning well, particularly if one

made a mess of it while trying to get enlightened or more enlightened.

Mastery of these stages tends to peak at some point, and the sense can arise that one has really “got it.” Fruitions tend to occur fairly quickly, clearly and easily. Given time and practice, they may begin to become somewhat bored with their current level of attainment and with their ability to attain these stages and Fruition. Their practice can begin to seem sloppy, and the quiet bliss wave after Fruition can diminish somewhat unless they do not attain it for some long period of time (which would probably require resolutions to that effect).

The understanding that there is more suffering to uproot grows.

They begin to see more levels of reality that are clearly not well understood or illuminated by their current understanding, hints of which probably showed themselves very soon after their attainment of that path. Subtle thoughts and mental patterns may be noticed at the edge of one’s perceptual threshold. Attention begins to incline towards the next level of reality that must be understood and away from familiar territory. More fresh insights begin to show up.

They begin to investigate reality with more effort and clarity as before and begin a new progress of insight from the beginning, i.e.

access concentration and then Mind and Body and the rest. This might play out as follows: fairly soon after the sense of strong mastery, one will simply be meditating along, perhaps a Fruition will occur, and then suddenly the mind drops into this new state rather than a new review cycle beginning again. It is stable, interesting, and somewhat jhana-like.

It is sort of like re-inhabiting one’s life or reconnecting with the sense of the observer. It is also likely the next Mind and Body. This could also happen when one was just going about one’s day.

The postural obsession, odd movements, strange tensions and

pains, emotional volatility, vibratory stuff that seems new, a fresh and clearer sense of what dualistic perspectives remain, and all of the other early progress of insight stuff may arise in its time naturally and perhaps sooner than one might wish. The phrase “leading onward” is often used to describe the wisdom that arises from dharma practice. Strangely, it is a phrase and a fact that I have cursed just as often as blessed, and entering new insight territory at inopportune times or before one feels 254

ready can reveal why. Insight cycles can sometimes be very traumatic, and it is often advisable to take a break to recover one’s sense of humor and appreciation of life before plunging on. However, at this point the dharma waits for no one and may plunge on regardless of your wishes.

Note well, for those in between stages, there initially is still the

ability to easily attain any of the previous stages starting at the level of the current Arising and Passing Away, so things can get quite murky if they are trying to figure out what stage they are in or attain specific new stages. It can be as if the early stages are opening up to us, whereas for a while things always started out at the level of the Arising and Passing away.

Fixating on thoughts about what stage you are in is guaranteed to cause some degree of suffering that is worthy of investigation, especially in the in between stages, though a gentle awareness of the maps can still be slightly useful. There can be a sort of a fork in the path for a while, with the meditator seemingly being able to choose whether to review previous stages or press on. It can seem as though the background is solidifying and the mind is growing nosier as well as less predictable and skillful. More of our stuff is suddenly bubbling up to the surface. We notice subtler thoughts and mental images, many of which we may wish we hadn't. We may feel less "enlightened," as if our realization were fading. Clear and consistent insight practice, i.e. understanding the Three Characteristics of all types of sensations, which includes thoughts of maps and goals, is the only thing that finally helps, just as before.

After the meditator crosses the next Arising and Passing Away Event, which may happen relatively quickly if they practice well and often, they will tend to have a very hard time re-attaining Fruition for a while. One may meditate along and then get stuck in a stage that seems to lead nowhere and is sort of like low equanimity, in that there are clear vibrations that are not varying with the breath or any other movement, and yet the background is too dense, noisy and poorly perceived for clear and complete formations to show themselves.

Finding the proverbial fork in the road to familiar territory can now be quite tricky, and even if they do find the way back, the old territory is unlikely to be particularly appealing. Old Fruitions may arise, but they may do so in a way that is less reliable or certain. Suddenly, the 255

meditator is "on the ride" again, and will soon have to face the fullness of the next Dark Night with all of its implications. It may even be more challenging than before, but could just as easily be less so. One friend of mine sailed through one Dark Night in about six minutes, and the next one took him many years. There is no predicting these issues of timing.

It can happen that many times they will try to meditate to

equanimity but fall back when they get to Re-observation. They may thus try to re-attain previous stages, as they may feel in over their heads.

They may get into the next stage of Desire for Deliverance, wish very strongly to go beyond all of this, and do so by re-attaining to a Fruition of the current path instead of attaining the next one.

However, even if they are able to retreat into the old territory, they will still be haunted to some degree by the Dark Night in their life and will have to learn to navigate skillfully in this territory one way or another. Sometimes re-mastering the current path is helpful for building a sufficient foundation from which to proceed well into the new territory. Eventually, there is no way to go back, and one is simply left facing the new territory without an obvious skillful escape route.

There can arise an odd phenomenon that has been referred to by one of my teachers as "Twelfth Path," though this phrase is not in common usage. It is, however, a common phenomenon in those who have attained at least stream entry and is probably the most important concept in this book for those working on the higher paths, particularly beyond second path. Twelfth Path is making a joke about the fact that there are at most four stages of enlightenment in the Theravada map and five or ten in the Tibetan maps. However, it can easily seem that more than ten brand-new and full-blown cycles of insight have been completed and yet there is still much more to go. If one is going to get obsessed with the fractal model that I mentioned earlier, it is likely to happen around here. Unfortunately, the fractal model is even more useless now than it was earlier, and so I strongly recommend avoiding it like the plague if you think you are in a new progress cycle rather than a review cycle.

Things might proceed as follows. It seems certain that a cycle has been completed. Next, there seems to be a clear mastery stage that withstands all of the most rigorous tests, then more early progress of

insight stuff shows up, the cycle begins to go around again, perhaps with more backsliding, moving forward, falling back again, remastering the old territory, more progress and suffering shows up with its associated struggles and rationalizations, then there comes a sense of there being no other option but progress and acceptance, and finally the sense that the cycle has completed itself. Soon enough there is a clear sense of a mastery stage, and so on. In this way, it may seem that some large number of paths or bhumis have been attained, twelve in the joke, when in fact they have not. Or have they? Unfortunately, this is a tough question, and one that cannot easily be resolved.

One may think that one is now at a higher stage of realization that is clearly different from before, but the "magic numbers" 4 or 10

simply may not seem to apply to one's journey. It can also happen that, with increased clarity and progressive deepening of one's practice, distinct progress of insight patterns may seem to be repeating within each of the smaller units of the larger pattern of the progress of insight, very much in the way of fractals, as detailed earlier. Beware! Do not get sucked into identifying with these idealized stages as actually being "where you are"!

New progress cycles and their accompanying vagueness can be very confusing if we are fixated on models but are not aware that the in-between territory is nearly impossible to successfully map in real-time.

We may sometimes feel that we have just gone through the larger progress of insight cycle when we may have actually only gone through a small part of it. We may begin to think we see first, second, third and fourth vipassana jhana aspects of each of the four larger vipassana jhanas. We may even begin to see patterns similar to those of a full progress of insight within each of the stages of the larger progress of insight or even within parts of each stage. A similar observation can arise in concentration practice with the samatha jhanas, but this tends to not be nearly as problematic or dramatic.

I have come to the conclusion that fear, anxiety, confusion, indecision and even certainty about these issues are clear markers of what needs to be investigated, i.e. those things themselves. In this way, these aspects of suffering have become trusted friends, clear signposts and red flags, as well as aspects of the goal, which is the path in the end.

The more we realize that those very processes are it, those very

sensations are it, the closer reality is to understanding itself. The closer reality is to understanding itself, the less fundamental suffering there is.

I have also come to the conclusion that the best reason to take these detailed maps to this extreme is that eventually they become way too ridiculous and cumbersome. Thus, eventually they can be laughed at and yet make their few useful points also, while leaving us with no option but to be with reality, one aspect of which is the sensations that make up thoughts about maps. We can learn to laugh at ourselves and our deep-seated but futile desire to simplify fresh patterns of sensations and solidify them into a sense of an attainment that "we" have.

On the darker side, when we are unable to do this, unable to laugh at our deluded attempts to fix or freeze a sense of what some illusory

“we” has done or attained, the phenomena of Twelfth Path and the complexity of the territory between paths can cause considerable doubt, pain, frustration and cynicism, the flip side of which is grandiosity. The more afraid we are of not making progress, the worse these sorts of feelings can become. The more we compare our practice to the misunderstood sensations that make up the sense of “others,” the more needless suffering arises. These sensation patterns must be investigated clearly and seen as they really are, as always.

When this all ends is a subject of considerable controversy, though like an idiot I am going to take on the topic of Full Enlightenment shortly. Anyway, it should be noted that a long-term view is very helpful sometimes, particularly if it helps one just be with what is happening today. It will often not be clear which event was actually the new Arising and Passing Event or which event was really a new Path until one has the benefit of a few more months or years of practice. One may experience many strange events, state shifts, insights and profound openings, all of which can be very compelling for some period of time.

However, there tend to be just a few of these memories that, on careful reflection, stand out in the mind as being really significant and by which one can clearly mark permanent shifts in one’s fundamental relationship to the experiences of life and the world.

In the next chapter, I will lay out a number of models of awakening that involve various numbers of shifts in understanding. One may be tempted, as I foolishly have been, to count the landmark events in one’s 258

Beyond First Path (“What Next?”)

practice and try to correlate them with these models based purely on the number of them that seem to have occurred. This is a setup for trouble, so please learn from those who have leaned the hard way and do not try it, as tempting as counting paths can be. A vastly superior form of inquiry and investigation is to carefully examine anything that seems to involve a sense of a split, of a this and a that, particularly at the rate of one to ten times per second or even faster if you can pull it off. What sensations seem to be the watcher, and what sensations seem to be watched? Try to see the true nature of these sensations one by one as they occur.

It must be said that after three or four of what seem like complete insight cycles or paths it can take quite a while to get a clear sense of what subtle dualities remain. You might find yourself walking around for days to months thinking, “Dang, I’ve really got it now. I’m just seeing it no matter what happens. Cool! I might have cracked the thing!

Dude.”

Give things time and beware of assuming that you have attained to more than you have. It is a very common and embarrassing problem, but those who know this territory will understand. However, those who do not know this territory may not be so forgiving, so beware of claiming a specific level of realization, particularly final realization, however you define it, until you have carefully checked things out for a very long time. I would advise thinking along the lines of, "Well, my working hypothesis is that it seems that I have achieved whatever, but I will keep an open mind and be cautious in what I say."

Use the descriptions of realization that follow to give yourself a general sense of the territory and what tends to need work and investigation. Avoid whenever possible the traps mentioned above, but when you realize you have fallen into them, which is ever so human and common, then accept this, learn from it and laugh! Should you realize that you have failed to heed this advice, that you have bought into some limited definition of yourself as a realized being of some defined rank or level despite the warnings, you can try to deny it for a while, that's OK.

You can imagine that you are very sure you know "where you are," as that sort of artificial solidification of reality is common enough. You can get pissed off at yourself, that's normal. You can beat yourself up if you 259

Beyond First Path ("What Next?")

think that it will help, though it rarely does. You can get bitter, though such responses tend to wear out their welcome. You can pump yourself up, dwelling on "your" imagined or real successes, though this tends to ring hollow soon enough. You can try to pretend you don't care what stage or level you have achieved, though eventually this gives itself away.

However, when you feel you are done with these things, accept, learn and laugh! Repeat as necessary and then get back to investigating those sensations.

260

Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha

30.MODELS OF THE STAGES OF ENLIGHTENMENT *

Before I discuss the various models, I should begin by saying that this is almost certainly the most easily misconstrued chapter in this book. Further, if you are a big fan of standard Buddhist dogma, I strongly recommend that you stop reading this chapter now and skip to the conclusion of this book. Seriously, I'm about to get quite irreverent again, but in that irreverence are bits of wisdom that are hard to find so explicitly stated elsewhere, so dismiss this chapter at your peril.

The temptation when thinking about enlightenment is to come up with something defined that you can imagine, such as a state or quality of being, and then fixate on that ideal rather than doing the practices that lead to freedom. It is absolutely guaranteed that anything you can imagine or define as being enlightenment is a limited and incorrect view, but these views are extremely tempting just the same and generally continue to be very seductive even through the middle stages of enlightenment. Every possible description of the potential effects of realization is likely to feed into this unfortunate tendency.

Thus, my distinct preference when practicing is to assume that enlightenment is completely impractical, produces no definable changes, and has nothing whatsoever to do with the scopes of the other trainings. This means that I take it as a working hypothesis that it will not make me a better person in any way, create any beneficial mental qualities, produce any states of happiness or peace, and provide no additional clarity into any of the issues surrounding how to live my ordinary life. I have experimented with adopting other views and found that they nearly always get in the way of my insight practices.

A view so easily becomes sacred, and thus the temptation is to not investigate the sensations that make up thoughts about that view, but rather to imitate the ideal expressed in the content of that view. This can seem like practice in fundamental insight, but it is not. I realize that I am not doing a good job of advertising enlightenment here, particularly following my descriptions of the Dark Night. Good point. My thesis is that those who must find it will, regardless of how it is advertised. As to the rest, well, what can be said? Am I doing a disservice by not selling it like nearly everyone else does? I don't think so. If you want grand

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

advertisements for enlightenment, there is a great stinking mountain of it there for you partake of, so I hardly think that my bringing it down to earth is going to cause some harmful deficiency of glitz in the great spiritual marketplace.

Bill Hamilton had a lot of great one-liners, but my favorite concerned insight practices and their fruits, of which he said, "Highly recommended, can't tell you why." That is probably the safest and most accurate advertisement for enlightenment that I have ever heard. There was a famous old dead enlightened guy (whose name ironically eludes me at the moment), who was known to have said, "I have gained absolutely nothing through complete and unexcelled enlightenment." A friend of mine thinks it was the Buddha, and it may have been.

Regardless, it is traditional to advertise enlightenment in the negative in the Buddhist tradition and many others, either stating what it is not or stating what is lost at each stage, but it is so very tempting to imagine that

"freedom from suffering" will naturally translate in to a permanent state of mental happiness or peace, and this can tempt one to try to mimic that idealized state. That would be a concentration practice.

Having said all of that, the fact is that the models of the stages of enlightenment are out there and available. Even when they are not explicitly mentioned, they have an obvious influence on how people describe realization. Thus, I have decided to try to work with them so that they might be used in ways that are helpful rather than harmful.

This is more difficult than it may initially sound.

There are days I wish the words for awakening didn't exist, the models had never exited, and that the whole process was largely unknown to the ordinary person so that it would be less mythologized and aggrandized, thus making conversations about it much more normal and less reaction-producing. I wish we could start over, strip away all the strange cultural and mythical trappings, create simple, clear terms, and move on with things.

There are other days when I think that at least people know it might be possible, even if most of what has been said about it is pretty fantasy-based. My greatest dream is that the current generation of enlightened teachers will go far out of their way to correct the descriptive errors and false promises of the past and lay the groundwork for perpetuation of 262

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment these reforms despite the economic and social pressures to do otherwise. One of the issues holding this back is that unfortunately only a few have gone far enough to see how the vast majority of the golden dreams of enlightenment do not hold up to reality testing. Another is that putting one's self on an artificial pedestal can be rewarding in many ways. One way or another, the number of voices trying to bring things back in line with what can actually be done is small in comparison to the forces that want to make it into something grand and thus largely unattainable.

Before I get too far into the details, I should explain that the most essential principle I wish to drive home is that THIS IS IT, meaning that this moment contains the truth. Any model that tries to drive a wedge between the specifics of what is happening in your world right now and what awakening entails needs to be considered with great skepticism. With the simple exception of the fact of poorly perceiving the sensations occurring now and habitually coming up with the

illusion of a separate, continuous individual, nearly all of the rest of the dreams are problematic to some degree. This basic principle is essential to practice, as it focuses things on the here and now, and also happens to be true. Back to the complexities…

The mental models we use when on the spiritual path can have a profound effect on our journey and its outcome. Most spiritual practitioners have never really done a hard-hitting look at their deepest beliefs about what "enlightenment" means or what they imagine will be different when they get enlightened. Many probably have subconscious ideals that may have come from sources as diverse as cartoons, TV

shows (Kung Fu comes to mind), movies, legends, 60's gurus, popular music, popular magazines, and other aspects of popular culture in general. More formal and traditional sources include the ancient texts and traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Sufism, Kabbala (however you spell it), Christianity, Western Mystical Traditions (Alchemy, Theosophy, Golden Dawn related traditions, etc.), the ancient Greek mystery schools (including the fragmentary writings of those like Heraclites), and the non-aligned or ambiguously aligned teachers such as Kabir, Khalil Gibran, J. Krishnamurti, and many others.

Modern fusion traditions, such as the various new versions of Buddhism and other traditions that are present in the West, also have a wide range of explicit and implied ideals about awakening. Plenty of people also seem to take their own inborn higher ideals for themselves or others that have arisen from sources hard to define and made these a part of their working if usually poorly-defined models of enlightenment.

There is also a strong tradition in the West of believing that enlightenment involves perfecting ourselves in some psychological sense, though this is also prominent in certain Eastern and traditional models as well in slightly different forms.

Just about all of these sources contain some aspects that may at times be useful and other aspects that at times may be useless or even send people in the wrong direction. The number of contradictions that can be found even within each specific tradition on the subject is much larger than I think most people imagine. For instance, those who attempt a systematic review of the dogmas of enlightenment within the Pali Canon will find themselves tangled in a mass of widely divergent doctrines, myths, stories and ideals, and this is only one tradition.

Thus, to take on the subject of the models of the stages of

enlightenment is a daunting task, but by breaking it down into simplified categories, some discussion of this wide mass of dogma and half-truth is possible. I will use both simple, broadly applicable models and also discuss specific models that come from some of the traditions and try to relate these to reality. In the end, relating them to reality is essentially the practice, and that falls to you.

I consider this attempt to be just one addition to an old tradition that attempts to reform the dogma and bring it back in line with verifiable truths, albeit one that is more specific and comprehensive than any that I have found. Each new culture, place, time and situation seems to need to do this again and again, as the forces within us and society that work to promote models that are out of touch with the truth of things are powerful and perennial, with money, power, fame, ideals of endless bliss and pleasure, the enticing power of the ideals of self-perfection and the pernicious inertia of tradition being chief among them.

In that same vein, this chapter is very much a situation in which I claim a very high level of realization, write as if what I have achieved is 264

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment sufficient authority to write a chapter such as this one, and then present it as if this is a definitive text on the subject, sufficient to contradict significant portions of 2,500 years of tradition and the teachings and writings of countless previous and current commentators. While it is hard from my current vantage point to not believe this to be true, anyone with sense will read this chapter with appropriate skepticism, and this, as I see it, is one of the strengths of properly applied Buddhism and rational thought in general. The Buddha was forever asking people to not take his word at face value, but instead to do the experiment and see if they come to the same conclusions. I recommend the same. If you are able to achieve something beyond what I state is possible, more power to you, and please let me know how you did it! I would feel real regret if I thought that this work had hindered anyone from achieving their full human potential, and am always looking for practices and concepts that are useful.

Here is a list of the basic categories of models that I use, though most traditions contain a mix of most or all of these. There are probably other aspects of the dreams of enlightenment that I have failed to address, but this list should cover most of the basic ones. I look at each of these as representing some axis of development, and basically all of them are good axes to work on regardless of what they have to do with enlightenment. That said, from what I have already written, it will not be hard to pick out my favorites:

1. Non-Duality Models: those models having to do with

eliminating or seeing through the sense that there is a fundamentally separate or continuous center-point, agent, watcher, doer, perceiver, subject, observer or similar entity.

2. Fundamental Perceptual Models: those that have to do with directly perceiving fundamental aspects of things as they are, including perceiving emptiness, luminosity, impermanence, suffering, and other essential aspects of sensations regardless of what those sensations are.

3. Specific Perceptual Models: those that involve being able to perceive more and more, or all, of the specific sensations that make up experience with greater and greater clarity at most or all times, and usually involve perfected, continuous, panoramic mindfulness or concentration at extremely high speed.

4. Emotional Models: those that have to do with perfecting or limiting the emotional range, usually involving eliminating things like desire, greed, hatred, confusion, delusion, and the like.

5. Action Models: those that have to do with perfecting or limiting the things we can and can't do in the ordinary sense, usually relating to always following some specific code of morality or performing altruistic actions, or that everything we say or do will be the exactly right thing to have done in that situation.

6. Powers Models: those that have to do with gaining in abilities, either ordinary or extraordinary (psychic powers).

7. Energetic Models: those that have to do with having all the energy (Chi, Qi, Prana, etc.) flowing through all the energy channels in the proper way, all the Chakras spinning in the proper direction, perfecting our aura, etc.

8. Specific Knowledge Models: those that have to do with gaining conceptual knowledge of facts and details about the specifics of reality, as contrasted with the models that deal with perceiving fundamental aspects of reality.

9. Psychological Models: those that have to do with becoming psychologically perfected or eliminating psychological issues and problems, i.e. having no "stuff" do deal with, no neuroses, no mental illnesses, perfect personalities, etc.

10. Thought Models: those that have to do with either limiting what thoughts can be thought, enhancing what thoughts can be thought, or involve stopping the process of thinking entirely.

11. God Models: those that involve perceiving or becoming one with God, or even becoming a God yourself.

12. Physical Models: those that involve having or acquiring a perfected, hyper-healthy or excellent physical body, such as having

long earlobes, beautiful eyes, a yoga-butt, or super-fast fists of steel.

13. Radiance Models: those that involve having a presence that is remarkable in some way, such as being charismatic or radiating love, wisdom or even light.

14. Karma Models: those that involve being free of the laws of reality or causes that make bad things to happen to people, and thus living a blessed, protected, lucky, or disaster and illness-free life.

 15. Perpetual Bliss Models: those models that say that enlightenment involves a continuous state of happiness, bliss or joy, the corollary of this being a state that is perpetually free from suffering. Related to this are models that involve a perpetual state of jhanic or meditative absorption.

16. Immortality Models: those that involve living forever, usually in an amazing place (Heaven, Nirvana, Pure Land, etc.) or in an enhanced state of ability (Angels, Bodhisattvas, Sorcerers, etc.).

17. Transcendence Models: those models that state that one will be free from or somehow above the travails of the world while yet being in the world, and thus live in a state of transcendence.

18. Extinction Models: those that involve getting off of the Wheel of Suffering, the round of rebirths, etc. and thus never being reborn again or even ceasing to be at the moment of enlightenment, that is, the great

"Poof!" on the cushion, not to be confused with the more mundane atmospheric consequences of a legume-based diet, as anyone who as been on a vegetarian meditation retreat knows all too well.

19. Love Models: those that involve us loving everyone and/or everyone loving us.

20. Unitive Models: that you will become one with everything in some sense.

21. Social Models: that you will somehow be accepted for what you may have attained, that you have attained something when people think you have, and variants on these themes.

Like me, you have probably run into most or all of these ideals of awakening in your spiritual quest and probably within yourself at some point in time, either consciously or unconsciously. Given all of these high ideals, it is not surprising that we find the task of awakening daunting if not preposterous. Imagine yourself as the universally-accepted radiant immortal angel bodhisattva bright-eyed yoga-butt-having all-loving one-with-the-universe endlessly mindful perfectly healthy emotionally perfected psychologically pure endlessly altruistic non-thinking desire-free psychic-superhero star-child of light, and then notice how this image may be in some contrast with your current life. If you are anything like me, you may notice a bit of a

discrepancy!

267

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

I will take on each model, relate them to a few of the traditions, and try to make sense of where these ideals came from. I will also address which ones are realistic and which are just a bunch of beautiful dreams that can either help you identify areas to work on or really screw up your spiritual quest if you are not careful. You will note that none of these models come from any formal tradition. In order to relate them to the traditions, here is a list of some models from Buddhism: 1. The Four Path Model from the Theravada, which involves becoming a stream-enterer, second path, third path and then an arahat (however you spell it).

2. The Five Path Model from the Tibetans.

3. The Ten Bodhisattva Bhumis from the Tibetans.

4. The ideal of Buddhahood from all the Buddhist traditions.

5. The Sudden and Gradual Awakening schools of Zen.

There are other models from other traditions (e.g. St. John of the Cross' Ladder of Love), and I have already mentioned these in the section on the Progress of Insight. I'm not going to go into much detail about them here, but when you are familiar with the models I am going to discuss you should be able to make some sense of them.

THE NON-DUALITY MODEL

The Non-Duality Model is without doubt my favorite of them all. It essentially says that the goal is to stop a process of identification that turns some patterns of sensations into a Doer, Perceiver, Center Point, Soul, Agent or Self in some very fundamental perceptual way. By seeing these sensations as they are the process can gradually be seen through until one day there are no more sensations that trick the mind in this way. My favorite quote that articulates this model is the one that goes something like, "In the seeing just the seen, in the hearing just the heard, in the thinking just the thought," and thus I may repeat this quote a few times just to make the point of how profound it is. Basically, there is just a field of sensations, as there was before, but now all of these sensations are progressively just seen to be as they are, and all the sensations that we generally call "me" are just a part of this process.

This model does not imply anything else, promises nothing related to any other models except in some loose way the Fundamental Perception Model that I will talk about shortly. The Non-Duality Model 268

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment is the one of the most practical models for practice, in that it focuses on simply seeing things as they are right now.

I will talk more about this model as we go, and have already talked about it often in a less direct way. I present it first to serve as a foil or counterpoint to all of the other models, and it is the only model that can withstand reality testing without qualification or difficulty. All of the other models may contain some degree of truth somewhere in them, either literally or poetically, but this one you can hang your hat on all the way through. This awareness develops gradually with some sharp jumps along the way, leading to the endless debates about sudden and gradual schools of awakening, a subject that will hopefully become more clear as we go, but probably deserves some mention here.

THE SUDDEN SCHOOLS OF AWAKENING

There are schools of awakening, particularly some Zen (Chan) traditions from China and Korea, and some interpretations of Hinduism, though this is not a complete list, that say that awakening happens in one big shift and that's basically it, regardless of exactly how you define "it". They deny the claims of the progressive schools (Theravada, Tibetans, some other strains of Zen, most schools of Sufism, Qabala, other Western Traditions, etc.) that there is mappable territory before awakening and that there might be lots to do after stream entry or whatever you want to call it. Possible explanations for these schools include:

1. There may be a few rare individuals that somehow manage to go straight to full awakening due to whatever interesting way they are wired or practiced, though I have never met anyone who did this.

2. There may be schools founded or influenced by people who got to the first stage of awakening and somehow never realized there could be anything more than that or got trapped in a lie about being fully awakened when they hadn't yet realized there was more to go and never retracted their initial, erroneous claim.

3. There are people who just thought that was the dogma somehow and stuck with it regardless of any issues of actually having insight.

4. Other explanations I haven't thought of or run across.

Being as every single person I have ever known has followed a progressive path, including myself, it is very hard for me to believe the sudden claims except for keeping open the possibility that there may be the exceedingly rare practitioner who occasionally manages to pull this off and thus imagines based on their limited experience that this is how it happens in general. In short, if you manage to do this, more power to you, and please let me know. Otherwise, I would bet on the gradual, progressive schools, and if you attain something that

you are pretty impressed by, give it time to see how it holds up when the troubles of the world come knocking at your door over the months and years after that shift of perspective.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PERCEPTION MODELS

Related to the Non-Duality Model, and also useful for practice, are the Fundamental Perception Models. I say models here because various traditions emphasize different qualities of reality as being essential. For instance, the Theravada uses the Three Characteristics of

Impermanence, Suffering and No-Self, as you already know well by this point. The Mahayana traditions (Tibetans in particular), may emphasize Shunyata or emptiness, and the Vajrayana traditions may emphasize luminosity or the space-like meditative equipoise of Dzogchen. They may also talk about Maha Ati, or express fundamental truths in some other way.

These models may directly state or imply that enlightenment

involves continuously perceiving these aspects of things in all sensations at a conscious level, so that every waking instant we were flooded with the sense of impermanence or luminosity or whatever as our dominant experience. While attempting to perceive this at all times is excellent practice advice, particularly when on retreat, were these models true then realization would seem to involve flooding the consciousness of the individual with a ton of information at all times. While there may be moments or bursts of this sort of perception in enlightened individuals, this is not what finally happens. Instead, with strong awareness of how things are, a process of identification stops, the switch is thrown, as noted above in the Non-Duality Models. By following the practice advice of the Fundamental Perception Models we may come to stop this process.

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment However, as the Buddha said, do not imagine that you must

continue to carry the boat once you have crossed the river. While enlightened individuals can at a whim notice the true aspects of sensations, just as color is clear to a person with good eyesight (assuming they are not color-blind), so these things are clear to an enlightened being to various degrees as they progress along the path. That said, just because one can perceive something doesn't mean that particular aspect is the dominant aspect of consciousness at all times. In short, the Fundamental Perception Models are very useful for practice, but do not quite accurately describe the final result.

THE SPECIFIC PERCEPTION MODELS

Specific Perception Models essentially state or imply that an enlightened being will be constantly hyper-aware of every single sensation that arises in their field of perception, including not just the

ultimate aspects of the Fundamental Perception Models, but also every single little detail of the content of those sensations, achieving at all times the perfected fusion of the completely open and panoramic perspective of High Equanimity with the laser-like precision of the Arising and Passing Away at its height. It implies that rather than stopping a process, enlightenment is about becoming so fantastically alert that you see not only the true nature but also the specifics of each and every sensation that arises at all times. This is not even close to what happens in reality. While enlightened beings will cycle through those stages, when mindfulness is low each of those stages will present in a low key way, and only for moments here and there will there be anything like that kind of awareness, though when enlightened beings are on retreat and/or really powering the mindfulness and concentration they can temporarily achieve something that resembles these high ideals.

The Specific Perception Models are another instance where practice instructions get turned into an ideal of what is supposed to happen in exactly the same way as happens with the Fundamental Perception Models. They become one more example of carrying the boat after we have crossed the river. Again, mindfulness comes and goes, sleep comes and goes (though the Tibetan teachings on dream yoga are very intriguing), concentration comes and goes, various perspectives and 271

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

perceptual thresholds parade through, and the cycles of the ñanas continue on and on.

The ideals in this model and many models that follow it are

sometimes used as a weapon by those who like to criticize those who rightly or wrongly claim to be enlightened. Examples include, “Don’t you remember when I said (such and such)?”, “Didn’t you notice how I cleaned the bathroom?”, or “How could you have forgotten to pay the power bill?” The implication inherent in each of these is that enlightened being should have perfect awareness of all aspects of their sensate reality as well as perfect memory of all of those aspects. This ideal is unfortunately completely bogus. I so wanted to be a Sensation Perceiving Superstar with a photographic memory and have been sorely disappointed. As basically everyone out there has some aspect of this model in their working definition of what “enlightenment” must be, these ideals can be a particular problem in relationships, particularly business relationships and romantic ones for those who are out of the closet about enlightenment.

In this basic vein, this brings up another selling point of realistic, down-to-earth, human models of what awakening brings. If you tell

people you are enlightened and also promote very high, idealized, delusional, perfectionistic models of awakening, those who actually get to know well will realize how full of shit you are, particularly people such as spouses or partners, business associated, best friends and the like. Further, the more you get stuck trying to be like the person you dream you are supposed to be rather than who you are, the more you can get isolated in your false and pretentious fantasy land, locked away from the grounding, healing, and helpful reality testing that comes from community and real, intimate human relationships. However, if the Specific Perceptual Models are a problem in this way, you haven't seen anything until you get to the Emotional Models.

THE EMOTIONAL MODELS

The Emotional Models are so fundamental to the standard ideals of awakening as to be nearly universal in their tyranny. You can't swing a dead cat in the Great Spiritual Marketplace without hitting them.

Almost every tradition seems to have gone out of its way to promote them in the most absurd and life-denying terms available, though there 272

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment have been attempts at reform also. I must give thanks for the attempts, however ineffective, bizarre, mythologized, cryptic, and vague, that the Tibetan and Zen traditions have occasionally made in this regard, and morn their nearly perpetual failure to make these issues clear. At least they tried, whereas the Theravada basically has really not tried in any significant way in 2,500 years so far as I can tell. If I am wrong, please let me know.

These emotional models basically claim that enlightenment involves some sort of emotional perfection, either gradually or suddenly, and usually make these dreams the primary criteria for their models of awakening and often ignoring or sidelining issues relating to clear perception of the true nature of phenomena. Usually these fantasies involves elimination of the "negative" emotions, particularly greed, hatred, anger, frustration, lust, jealousy, and sadness. At a more fundamental level, they promise the elimination of all forms of attraction and aversion.

As I am sure you can already tell, I am no fan of these models of enlightenment. In fact, I consider their creation and perpetuation to be basically evil in the good old "You Should Burn In Hell For

Perpetuating Them" kind of way, though as guidelines for trying to be kind and behave well (training in morality) I find them of value. I know both what hints of truth they contain and also what a marketing ploy they are, and will attempt to make both aspects clear.

This is not easy to do, and the dogma of the Emotional Models is so deeply ingrained in us all that shaking it can be the work of a lifetime even in enlightened beings.

The practical application of making this distinction is based upon the fact that we will try to realize the model we consciously or unconsciously adopt. It is extremely tempting if we buy into the limited emotional range models to go around imitating an emotionally limited state, repressing or ignoring aspects of our basic human nature. There are some benefits to repressing the manifestations of negative emotions while simultaneously being conscious and accepting of the fact that difficult emotions occur. However, if we repress them and also pretend that they don't exist, this sort of cultivated denial can also produce huge shadow sides and a lot of neurotic behavior.

A far more practical approach is to accept that we are human, try to be decent in a normal sort of way rather than in a grandiose spiritual way, and to assume that reducing and eliminating the illusion of the dualistic split is possible through doing basic insight practices. Reducing the sense of a split can provide more clarity, allowing us to be the human beings that we are with more balance and less reactivity in the face of that humanity.

THE THERAVADA FOUR PATH MODEL

The root of the problem in standard Buddhism comes to us from the Theravada Four Path Model. This is the original model presented in the Pali Canon and the oldest model we have to work with. All the subsequent schools (Mahayana of various strains and the Vajrayana) react to it in their way but are still influenced by it even if they say they are not, so you need to know it to understand the debate.

Actually, the problems began long before in ancient Hinduism (which had a huge impact on Buddhism, despite what some Buddhist will tell you) and probably before that, but this is as good a place to start as any. I shouldn't blame ancient India for what is really a perennial human wish. Let's face it: we all want emotional perfection, as a large chunk of the pain felt in modern life relates to people's emotions causing trouble. I will claim that not perceiving our emotions clearly is a far greater problem than the emotions themselves, but I am clearly in the minority in this regard. As I stated in the chapter called Harnessing the Energy of the Defilements, there is a lot to be said for aspects of what we usually consider the bad emotions. It is important to realize that empty compassion underlies all our emotions, whether filtered through the illusion of duality or otherwise.

The Theravada Four Path Model is a model involving four stages of awakening, namely First Path or Stream Entry (Pali: sotapanna), Second Path or Once Returner (sakadagami), Third Path or Never Returner (anagami) and finally Fourth Path, Holy One, Saint, or Conqueror (

arahat, arhat, arahant, or arhant, pick your favorite spelling). The terms Once Returner and Never Returner have to do with issues relating to the dogma that those who have attained to second path cannot be reborn more than once before attaining arahatship, and certainly not in the lower realms (hell realms, hungry ghost realms or animal realms), 274

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment and that those of third path, if they do not attain to arahatship in this lifetime, will at worst be reborn into a heaven realm where the conditions are optimal for achieving enlightenment. However, the core of the Theravada Four Path Model is the dogma that enlightenment involves progressively eliminating the Ten Defilements in the following manner.

Stream Entry eliminates the first three defilements: skeptical doubt, attachment to rites and rituals, and personality belief. Second Path attenuates the fourth and fifth defilements, usually translated as greed and hatred or more technically as attraction and aversion to everything that is not a jhanic state. Third Path is said to eliminate those same fourth and fifth defilements however translated. Fourth Path, that of arahatship, eliminates the remaining five defilements of attachment to formed jhanas (the first four jhanas), attachment to the formless realms (the second four jhanas), restlessness and worry, "conceit" (in quotes because it is a bit hard to translate), and something called "the last veil of unknowing".

It is important to note that arahats that are said to have "eliminated conceit" (in limited emotional range terms) can appear absolutely arrogant and conceited, as well as restless or worried, etc. That there is no fundamental suffering in them while this is going on is an utterly separate issue. That said, conceit in the conventional sense and the rest of life can cause all sorts of conventional suffering for arahats just as it can for everyone else. While I am on the subject of conceit, perhaps I should take on the subject of the word "ego" in a more comprehensive way than I have done so far.

The pop psychology meaning of the word "ego" is something like arrogance, pride, narcissism, and a failure to take into account the feelings, rights and/or existence of others. This is also the definition that is the most commonly behind such mainstream Buddhist statements as,

"That action or statement that I really didn't like had a lot of 'ego' in it."

I think that this definition of ego can sometimes be slightly useful for training in morality if we are very kind to ourselves and those around us, but often it seems to me to be pop spirituality turned into a weapon and a form of denial of someone else's difficulties, feeling and suffering.

Worse, people often take this definition, mix it in with their own insecurities and unfortunate fear of existing or asserting themselves in the conventional sense, and then take this neurotic mixture and use it to continue to flog themselves and those around them. Please don't do this. It is misguided and will not help you or anyone. This pop psychology definition of ego also has nothing to do with enlightenment in the formal sense, and so don't bring it to mind when you read this chapter except to dismiss it.

Another definition of ego is the formal psychological one put forward by Freud. In this definition, ego is the moderator between the internalized parent or police of the super-ego and the primal drives of the id, those being largely for reproduction and survival. In this sense, ego is an extremely good thing and should be cultivated consciously and without restraint. This definition has to do with the more formal psychological concept of "ego strength," a strength that is very positive and necessary for the deep and often difficult personal growth that we all want for ourselves. One of the explicit requirements for entering intensive psychoanalysis is high ego strength, the ability to face one's reality and dark stuff without completely freaking out. Thus, eliminating this form of ego would be a disaster.

For reasons completely beyond me, the word "ego" is also used in a high mystical sense to describe the elimination of the experiential illusion of there being a special reference point as described in the chapter on the Three Characteristics in the section on no-self. One who had eliminated this form of ego, which is in this case a useless illusion, might describe their experience in this way, "In this full field of experience or manifestation, there seems to be no special or permanent spot that is observing, controlling, separated from, or subject to any other point or aspect of the rest of this causal field of experience or manifestation."

This is the experience and realization of the arahat. Notice that this definition of ego seems to have nothing whatsoever with the other definitions of ego. This is exactly the point, and so I strongly advocate never using the word ego in the context of describing realization or the goal of the spiritual life, or at least not doing so without extensive explanation of this particularly special and uncommon usage of the

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment term. Those who do otherwise continue to cause an astounding amount of unrealistic, disempowering and life denying thinking in mainstream Buddhists. It is my sincere wish that the misuse of the word ego and its associated negative side effects stop immediately and forever. Back to the models…

As the Theravada Four Path Model explicitly states that realization is all about eliminating greed, hatred, restlessness, worry, etc., this is as explicitly a limited emotional range model, and, as expected, deserves some serious skepticism. In fact, this is a good time to go into what I love and despise about the Theravada. I absolutely love their emphasis on the Three Characteristics, love the astounding power of their techniques and am grateful beyond words for the maps they provided me for the territory before stream entry, however incomplete and idealized. I am profoundly grateful, at times to the point of tears, and I mean that, for the monasteries I got to sit in, for their preservation of that which is true and useful in Buddhism for 2,500 years, and for the chance to have sat with real, enlightened teachers because of their perseverance and work.

And yet, their maps of enlightenment still contain a hefty helping of scary market-driven propaganda and so much garbage that is life-denying, dangerously out of touch with what happens, and an

impediment to practice for millions of people. That the enlightened lineage holders of the modern Theravada and their ex-monk Western counterparts don't have the balls to stand up and say, "We are deeply sorry that for 2,500 years our predecessors perpetuated this craziness to put food in their bowls and fool ignorant peasants so that they might be supported in their other useful work, and we vow to do better!" is a crying shame.

They are chained to the texts, myths and the ancient lies, seemingly doomed to indoctrinate and brainwash generation after generation of monks, practitioners and devoted followers with their delicious poison.

What a freakish paradox that the meditative techniques and

technologies that I consider among the most powerful and direct ever created should come from a tradition whose models of awakening contain some of the worst bullshit of them all. I have sat with numerous arahats who were monks or former monks who just couldn't seem to 277

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

overcome their indoctrination and so when giving dharma talks would habitually mix in the crap with the gold when it was obvious they knew better.

I have at times dreamed that all the teachers from all the lineages

would get together in secret, come up with a plan to jointly get themselves out of the trap, and in a big formal ceremony present the truth as a new beginning, like a mass intervention, like a family gathering around an alcoholic to try to force them to reform their ways. None of them on their own seem to be fully able to take the heat, as each one that steps out of line in a direct fashion tends to get blasted, though there are exceptions, such as Jack Kornfield's After the Ecstasy, the Laundry. Thus, I think they should all try to do it together, with Zen Masters, Lamas, Rinpoches, Tulkus, Sayadaws, Achaans, and their Western counterparts all standing side by side saying, "Enough is enough! We are declaring a new era of honest, open, realistic dharma teaching, free from sectarian fighting, free from preposterous models of awakening, and free from denial of humanity!" Enough of my ranting, back to the models…

I have no major beef with their description of stream entry. It does make people realize somewhat that rites and rituals are not the primary reason that they got enlightened, though I know of a number of practitioners that got enlightened with the help of techniques that were very ritualistic and continue to include rituals of various sorts in their practice, and why not. Stream entry does counter in some semi-intellectual way the sense that there is a permanent, separate self, though exactly how they know this is much more vague and mysterious to them than at the higher stages of awakening, though it beats the pants of any understanding of this that is pre-stream entry.

Further, they know that awakening is possible and can be done in this lifetime, assuming they know they are awakened in the first place, which strangely not all enlightened beings do. Those persons that encounter these understanding outside of established traditions may fail to recognize that what they have understood is called awakening and other names. Regardless, stream entry is known as the opening of the Dharma Eye, as contrasted with the Wisdom Eye of arahatship. These 278

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment are simply poetic metaphors for some aspects of clearly perceiving things.

My real problem with the Theravada Four Path Model comes as

soon as it starts talking about second path, i.e. the attenuation of greed and hatred or attraction and aversion, and by the time it promises eliminating these in their ordinary forms as they say occurs in third path, I think that serious critique of their language and dogma is called for.

What they are attempting to say is that the sense of the observer, center point, continuous and separate subject, watcher or however you want to describe the sense that there is some Self at the center of all this stuff that so compelling seems to divided into Self and Other is,

in fact, just a bunch of sensations. When these begin to be perceived as they are, the sense of how special the center point is begins to lose its grip on perception, which begins to become wider, more inclusive, and more even in its basic treatment of phenomena. Thus, as there doesn't seem to be so much of a this side and a that side, attempts to get away from that side when it is bad, get to that side when it is good, or just tune out to the whole thing when it is boring diminish at some basic perceptual level, and so the system functions better as it is better at realistically interpreting the information coming into it.

This is a very tough thing to talk about, and certainly doesn't sell as well as saying, "Do these things, and you will be free from all negative emotions," or worse, "We did these things and so are free from all negative emotions, and so you should worship us, give us donations, support our center, buy our books, give over power to us, think of us as very special or amazing, stand in awe of us, sleep with us, allow us to act like raving nutcases, etc." I think you get the picture. Thus, what happens in reality is that segments of the process of making specific categories and patterns of the causal, sensate field into a separate "self"

is reduced and then stops. However, many of the traditions advertise eliminating negative emotions and the sensations of craving or aversion.

The two couldn't be more different, and yet they are described as being the same.

A REVISED FOUR PATH MODEL

Here is my revised version of the Four Path Model, and this is the primary model I use when describing awakening, talking about my

practice, and helping others practice. I think that using the original terminology and revising its definitions allows a lot of good material in the Pali Canon to be used, thus provides a link to previously done work.

However, I realize that using terminology that already has such deep cultural and dogmatic resonance may be a problem. For those who want something new, I will shortly present a rephrasing of this model that I call the Simple Model.

In the Revised Four Path Model, Stream Enterers have discovered the complete discontinuity that is called Fruition and sometimes called Nirvana or Nibbana (Sanskrit vs. Pali). This is the first of two meanings of Nirvana, with the other being Fourth Path. Stream enterers cycle through the ñanas, know that awakening or some different

understanding from the norm is possible, and yet they do not

have all that different an experience of most sensations from those who are not yet stream enterers. They may correctly extrapolate a lot of good dharma insights from momentary experiences, particularly high up in High Equanimity and the three moments before a Fruition, but this is not the same as living there all the time. In fact, most stream enterers have a very hard time describing how things have changed in terms of their daily life except that they cycle and can understand the dharma in ways they never could before.

Those of Second Path have now completed a new insight cycle.

They understand the process by which enlightened beings make further progress and equate progress with further cycles of insight, which is partially true. More model-obsessed or intellectual practitioners at second path may get very into fractal models, consciousness models, enlightenment models, various integrative theories, and that sort of thing at this stage of practice. Psychological issues tend to be a bit more of a big deal during this phase, and psychological development become interesting to them in some way. By this point most people, though certainly not everyone, also have a pretty good understanding of the basics of the samatha jhanas, and these can be very fascinating. What they may be most bothered by is that cycle after cycle of practice, duality remains the predominant experience most of the time.

Those of Third Path have shifted their understanding of what progress is from those of Second Path, and have begun to see that it is

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment about perceiving the emptiness, selflessness, impermanence, luminosity etc. of sensations in daily life and begin to see that they have the ability to do this. This can be a long, developmental process from the first time they notice this to it becoming a nearly complete experience. Thus, Third Path tends to be a long path, though it doesn't have to be.

At the beginning of Third Path, most practitioners think: "I'll just complete more cycles of insight, like I did before, and this will do the trick." They don't tend to understand what it is they have attained all that well yet, nor its deeper implications. By the mature stage of Third Path, which can take months to years to show up, the practitioner is more and more able to see the emptiness, selfless, centerlessness, luminosity, etc. of phenomena in real-time, so much so that it can be very difficult to notice what artificial perceptual dualities remain.

As they cycle, they will enter new territory, possibly causing some uncertainty or instability, and with each Review phase they tend to really feel that they have done it until they begin to notice the limits of their practice. There can be this nagging something in the background that things aren't done, and yet figuring out exactly what

the problem is can be very slippery. It is a bit like being in the stages before stream entry, trying to figure out what exactly needs to be done. They need to notice something that has nothing to do with the cycles, to finally untangle the knot of perception at its core, but doing this can be a real trick. It is a very strange place, as one seems to know the dharma all the way to the end and yet somehow it just isn't quite enough. In that vein, it is interesting to note that I wrote the vast majority of this book while I was some sort of anagami, and on reflection I got just about everything right.

My emphases are slightly different now, but the basics are all the same.

As things progress, anagamis begin to tire of the cycles to a small or large degree and begin to look to something outside of them or not related to them for the answer to the final question. Finally, the cycles of insight, the states of concentration, the powers, and all the other perks and prerogatives of their stage of awakening or concentration abilities (if they developed them) hold no appeal and only lead to more

unsatisfying cycles.

I completed around 27 full, complete insight cycles with mind-blowing A&P Events, Ass-kicking Dark Nights, Equanimity phases, and 281

what seemed to be brand new, fresh Fruitions and Review phases between third and fourth path. There is nothing special about that number, both because it is just a guess and because of the reasons I stated when describing the phenomena of Twelfth Path. The later cycles got faster and faster, so that by the end it seemed I was whipping one out every few weeks or even every few days, but they still seemed to be leading nowhere.

It was only when I had gotten so sick of the cycles and realized that they were leading nowhere that I was able to see what has nothing to do with the cycles, which also wasn't anything except a strange untangling of the knot of perception of them. The cycles, for better or worse, have continued just the same. Thus, there is not much point in counting cycles or paths, as they don't necessarily correlate well with anything past the first two or three, and issues of backsliding can really make things complex, as I explained earlier.

Finishing up my Revised Four Path Model, arahats have finally untangled the knot of perception, dissolved the sense of the center point actually being the center point, no longer fundamentally make a separate Self out of the patterns of sensations that they used to, even though those same patterns of sensations continue. This is a different understanding from those of Third Path in some subtle way, and

makes this path about something that is beyond the paths. This is also poetically called the opening of the Wisdom Eye. What is interesting is that I could write about this stage quite well when I was an anagami, but that is a whole different world from knowing it like arahats know it.

The Wisdom Eye may seem to blink initially. It may go through cycles of flashing open just after a Fruition and then slowly fading over a few hours (at least on retreat) as each round of physical sensations, then mental sensations, then complex emotional formations, then lastly fundamental formations such as inquiry itself move through and become integrated into this new, correct and direct perception of reality as it is. Review cycles may occur many times during each flash, but when the eye is open they seem rather irrelevant in comparison to keeping the level of clarity and acceptance high enough to keep the eye open. When the eye fades and the knot of perception seems to retie itself, the familiar insight cycles may seem like pure drudgery, with the focus 282

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment drifting back to getting lost in the cycles and then gradually shifting again to getting clear enough to get the eye to open again. The themes that occupy center stage go through a cycle that is very much like a progress cycle.

Finally, the Wisdom Eye cycles and insight cycles all converge, and the thing stays open from then on, which is to say that at that point it all seems the same whether or not the eye is open, which it actually was.

That being seen, nothing can erode or disturb the centerlessness of perspective. Done is what is to be done, and life goes on. That there are arahats who have opened the Wisdom Eye but had it fade and those who have opened it and had it stay open is rarely mentioned but worth knowing.

For the arahat who has kept the thing open, there is nothing more to be gained on the ultimate front from insight practices, as “done is what is to be done”. That said, insight practices can still be of great benefit to them for a whole host of reasons, there is a ton they can learn just like everyone else about everything else there is to learn. They can grow, develop, change, work and participate in this strange human drama just like everyone else. Practicing being mindful and the rest still helps. They also cycle through the stages of insight, as with everyone above stream entry, so doing insight practices can move those cycles along.

A SIMPLE MODEL

In earlier versions of this work, I had a model called The Heart Sutra Model. The Simple Model is the less mysterious, stripped down version of that earlier model, though in its essence it is the same.

While in one sense it is also rephrasing of the Revised Four Path Model, as it has no numbers, and is free of the traditional names, it has some advantages over that terminology.

I present this somewhat novel model here because it focuses on real insight directly and treats any emotional benefits of this as side effects.

Further, there are often too many cycles of insight before arahatship, making the Four Path model troublesome. This phenomena of too many cycles (which I will sometimes call “paths” with a lowercase “p”) between each of the Four Paths gets worse as one works towards final awakening. As Bill Hamilton put it, and I have learned the hard way,

“The arahat fractal is vast.”

The Simple Model does not reinforce fascination with content, nor with life denying ideals or limited emotional range models in the way that the traditional Four Path Model often does. It does not tempt one to count paths. It keeps the focus on precise inquiry into the truth and one’s experience of it or lack thereof.

This model basically says that enlightenment is about direct insight that progressively reveals something different in the relationship to the field of experience and gradually allows things in it to be held in their proper proportion. Thus, it is a Non-Duality Model.

The first understanding is that sensations are sensations, thoughts are thoughts, and this forms the basis of further inquiry. When the universal characteristics of these sensations begin to be seen, this represents growth in understanding. When the whole sense field is known directly and completely as it is, this can cause an entrance into Fruition through one of the Three Doors, and represents the first stage of awakening.

When one appreciates the cycles of the process of awakening and has completed at least one more new progress cycle, this is the next stage. When one begins to appreciate the emptiness, luminosity, centerlessness, agentlessness, etc. of phenomena in real-time and this becomes the focus of practice rather than Fruition, this is the next stage.

When the sense of the watcher, observer, subject, controller, doer, etc.

is seen completely as it is and the knot of perception untangles, that simple, fundamental way of perceiving things is the next stage of awakening. When that untangling stays untangled, that is the next stage.

As that understanding is integrated into our lives, that is the next

phase, though it is more an ongoing process than a stage.

The problem is that the traditions seem to want to make this understanding into so much more than it is, such as add ideals of emotional perfection onto this. There is some truth in the models dealing with emotions, but it has to do with things moving through faster and being seen more clearly. It does not have anything to do with bad emotions not arising. I hate to even go here, as my goal is to give the emotional models the bashing they richly deserve, but I also want to not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Thus, here it goes.

284

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment As the deep-seated perceptual sense of a separate, continuous, permanent, observing Agent stops being extrapolated from the same old patterns of sensations that seemed to be those, there is this wider inclusive something that can come into the consciousness of the enlightened individual, depending on their level of awakening. There is also a slowly growing directness of perception that comes as reality is not filtered so exclusively through thought. These two can combine to give the emotions of enlightened beings less sticking power, so that they may move through more quickly than for those that are not enlightened, and also may be seen more quickly and clearly as they arise and vanish.

There may also be less blind contraction into thoughts and emotions and a wider perspective, thus giving the other parts of the brain more of a chance of creating moderated responses to the emotions. That said, even when seen through, there seems to be a biological component to how emotions move through that can only be expedited so much.

Anyone who thinks these highly qualified statements are anything like a vision of emotional perfection or the elimination of all negative emotions is not paying attention! That is the last thing I wish to imply. I merely wish to say that there is some increased clarity about our basic human experience and it can help, but that is all. That said, you would be amazed how angry, lustful or ignorant enlightened beings can be, and they can still do all sorts of stupid things based on these emotions, just like everyone else. The ability to moderate responses to emotions can sometimes give the impression that those emotions have been

attenuated, but that is not the same thing, and there is my nice transition to the Action Models.

THE ACTION MODELS

The Action Models tend to involve certain actions that enlightened beings cannot commit or certain actions they must commit. Both types of models are completely ridiculous, and so we

come now to the first of the models that simply has no basis in reality. The traditional Theravada models contain numerous statements about what enlightened being cannot do or will do that are simply wrong. My favorite examples of this insanity include statements that arahats cannot break the precepts (including killing, lying, stealing, having sex, doing drugs or drinking), cannot have erections, cannot have jobs, cannot be married, and cannot 285

say they are arahats. They also state that unordained arahats must/will join the Theravada monastic order within 7 days of their realization or they will die. Needless to say, all are simply absurd lies, lies that have unfortunately often been perpetuated by arahats.

There is also another more subtle and seductive view, and this is that enlightened being somehow will act in a way that is better or higher, though they won't define what those actions might be or what actions they might avoid. I consider this view very dangerous. While I wish to promote the shift in perception that I call awakening and other names, I don't want to make out that somehow this will save anyone from stupid actions or make them somehow always know how to do the right thing or avoid screwing up. Such views are a setup for massive badness and huge shadow sides, as anyone who has spent enough time in a spiritual community knows all too well. As Zen says, "The bigger the front, the bigger the back."

The list of highly enlightened individuals who have bitten the proverbial dust by putting themselves up on high, screwing up and then being exposed as actually being human is remarkably long, and the list of spiritual aspirants who have failed to draw the proper conclusions about reality from the failures of the enlightened is even longer. There are many schools of thought on this issue, and I will give them formal names here, though in reality they don't think of themselves this way.

The Halfway Up the Mountain School essentially believes, "Those who screwed up and caused a scandal were only part way up the mountain, only partially enlightened, as anyone who was really enlightened couldn't possibly have done those terrible things." While clearly some were only partially enlightened, or perhaps not enlightened at all in the technical sense, a number of those who screwed up clearly knew ultimate reality inside and out, and so this model misses many important points.

There is the Crazy Wisdom School that believes, "Enlightened beings transcend ordinary reality and with it ordinary morality, so that they are the natural manifestation of a Wisdom that seems crazy to us foolish mortals but is really a higher teaching in disguise!" While not entirely absurd, as there are many cultural aspects and societal

rules that can seem a bit childish, artificial, unnecessary, unhelpful or naive in the 286

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment face of realization, the Crazy Wisdom School provides too easy an excuse for plenty of behavior that has been and is just plain bad, irresponsible, stupid and needlessly destructive.

Then there is my school, for which I don't have a catchy name, and it promotes the view that, "Enlightened beings are human, and unfortunately humans, enlightened or otherwise, all screw up sometimes. There is nothing special or profound about this." In short, my school categorically rejects the specific lists and dogmas of the traditional Action Models in all forms, from the preposterous lists of the Theravada to the subtle sense that enlightened beings somehow are guaranteed to perpetually act in "enlightened" ways, whatever those are.

That said, the ability to see things as they are does allow for the possibility of more moderated responses to situations and emotions, as stated earlier. That is a very different sort of a concept from coming up with a list of things that enlightened being never would or could do, and it certainly doesn't mean they will necessarily act the way we think they will. Further, while this is not an exhaustive list, the behavior of any being is always affected by the following:

1. The standard laws of the natural world
2. The limits of their level of realization
3. The ingrained habits of the realized individual, including their personality quirks and "stuff"
4. The residue of the shadow sides of the techniques and traditions they used to attain their understanding (don't underestimate these!) 5. The fact that mindfulness waxes and wanes (at least in arahats and below and in all realistic definitions of buddhas)
6. The fact that confusion and stupidity can still occur exactly as before 7. The limits of the relative knowledge and experiences of the realized individual
8. The psychological and physiological issues that apply to the brain and body of the realized individual
9. Their cultural upbringing and the relative mores created by it.

You will notice that this is quite a realistic and long list. Thus, the dogmas of the standard action models, while containing a few grains of truth, are simply wildly inaccurate, and generally represent some of the worst of the models of enlightenment.

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

A closely related issue is the tensions between the "technically enlightened" models and the limited possible action models. There are schools of thought that say, "One enlightened action and one is a Buddha, one deluded action and one is an ordinary human being."

These have their value from a certain behavioral point of view, and can serve as a valuable reminder to all that conventional morality tends to be an extremely good idea most of the time. I, for one, think that everyone, regardless of purported realizations or a lack thereof, should be held to a high and fairly traditional moral standard, though in some human, just, and forgiving way. However, teachings based on some arbitrary ideal called "enlightened action" can begin to diminish the importance of direct realization of the truth of things and reinforce the mythical garbage of the limited possible action models of realization.

There are people who are "technically" unenlightened (meaning that they have never completed even one progress of insight or attained to any direct understanding of emptiness or non-duality) who

nonetheless live lives that would be considered unremittingly saintly by even the very highest standards. I have been fortunate enough to have met a few of these people and continue to stand in awe of them. Just so, there are those who are “technically” very highly enlightened, perhaps even arahats or buddhas, who nonetheless can appear exceedingly ordinary, seem to be of distinctly questionable moral virtue, or even sometimes be downright debauched and outrageous. I have met a good number of these also.

While the failure of the limited or enlightened actions models and limited emotional models is a huge disappointment from one point of view, it also means that there is hope for the rest of us. Our lives are it, our emotions are it, our habits are it, our limitations are it, our neuroses are it, our issues are it, and our shadow sides are it. How can we attain understanding if we do not see clearly into reality as it is? How can we see clearly into reality as it is if we spend most of our time thinking that it isn’t good enough to even examine clearly?

THE POWER MODELS

On a rather different tangent, enlightened beings are often believed to have various kinds of powers, typically extraordinary ones, and thus we have the Power Models. The converse of this is the belief that 288

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment people who have extraordinary powers might be or must be

enlightened. However, the relationship between the powers and fundamental insight are slim, though not non-existent. Psychic powers come out of samatha or concentration practices, particularly the fourth samatha jhana, though they also may arise in the stages of the Arising and Passing Away, High Equanimity, and sometimes in other stages and states as well. Some people just seem to have them regardless of their concentration or insight abilities. If you didn’t read the section on the Psychic Powers in the chapter on the Samatha Jhanas, please do so now.

Note, nearly all of the states and stages where the powers arise can be attained by beings who have not yet reached the first stage of awakening, and so we can see that there is no clear connection between nearly all of the powers and awakening. The short-list of powers that are the exclusive domain of the enlightened are attaining to Fruitions, attaining Nirodha Samapatti (a deep state described in the Appendix), and being able to talk about the dharma from their own direct experience of it. There are some other things to be said about how the stages of realization make a few other things available, but this is a subtle, complex topic that I may take on at some later time.

It is true that along the way to awakening it is hard to avoid

chancing into all sorts of experiences that are described in the standard lists of the powers, and it is also much easier to develop the samatha jhanas when you are in the Review phase of a path than it is if you are not enlightened. However, developing those into powers that can be attained again and again is a completely different matter and still unrelated to enlightenment except on this one front: there is something about the direct perception of the interconnection of things that does lend a certain something to utilization and development of the powers.

Thus, we see some hint of why there are these models of awakening.

However, as stated above, these are associations and nothing more. In summary, just because someone has powers doesn't mean they are enlightened, and just because someone is enlightened doesn't mean they will have any psychic powers that are not directly related to their clear perception of things.

THE TIBETAN TEN BHUMI MODEL

This is probably a good time to introduce the Tibetan Ten Bodhisattva Bhumi Model. The word "bhumi" mean ground, or something like level. It is a model of progressive stages of enlightenment that gets very different emphases depending on the author, but one of those emphases has to do with powers and how many duplicates of one's self one can manifest psychically. I actually like the Bhumi model, as other takes on it have to do with giving up the notion of personal territory and realizing shunyata or emptiness and deeply integrating that into our perception, paradigm, practice, and personality. It is a model that addresses many fronts, only one of which unfortunately is the powers.

The details of the Ten Bhumi Model can be found in various Mahayana texts, such as "The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom" and "The Jewel Ornament of Liberation". Chogyam Trungpa gives a nice description of it in The Myth of Freedom. Some texts also list other numbers of bhumis, such as 7 or 13, but they all share similar elements.

I do not consider myself an expert on this model, though I do understand the territory it covers. It is a very complex model that ascribes a wide range of exceedingly high and complex criteria involving emotions, paradigms, concentration abilities, perceptions, psychic powers and a whole host of other aspects to those of each stage. Thus, from my point of view, it is fraught with problems and assumes simultaneous, synchronized development on numerous axes,

a notion I consider a bit naïve and idealized. However, like most of the teachings, it contains some very interesting points made in what I consider very unfortunate ways. Thus, I recommend you check it out cum grano salis, particularly if you want to understand Tibetan texts or do practices in that tradition.

Lining the model of the Bhumis up with the Four Paths also

involves some controversy. That the first bhumi is stream entry is straightforward. Beyond that, things get difficult. At points I have lined anagamihood up with anywhere from the 4th to the 7th bhumis and arahatship with anywhere from the 6th to 10th bhumis. These are not perfect correlations, and if you spend some time reading about the model you will see why. I recommend that you check out the sources 290

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment listed above if you are interested in further information about the Bhumis.

The biggest problem with this model is that it delineates the number of duplicates of one's self that one should be able to manifest as bodhisattvas at each bhumi, and as the bhumis progress the numbers quickly get so large as to be absurd. Why some whackjob included this bizarre ideal of many-fold bi-location in the model I have no idea, but somehow no Tibetan since has had the balls to throw it out, and so a thousand years later they are still stuck with it. Aside from these problems, the texts that describe the bhumis makes for very interesting reading, particularly in the middle stages of enlightenment.

THE TIBETAN FIVE PATH MODEL

While I am on the subject of the Tibetan Models, I will present the Tibetan Five Path Model. In this model, the details of which can be found in various places, such as Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's book Dharma Paths on Snow Lion. As that book does such a good job of explaining the dogma and is not expensive, I will give only a brief treatment of that model here.

First Path covers the territory from just beginning through the Arising and Passing Away, and is called the Path of Accumulation. In the territory of First Path, one accumulates direct insight into the true nature of sensations by direct investigation of impermanence and the selfless nature of phenomena, as one does in the first four ñanas.

Second Path, that of Unification, encompasses the territory from the Arising and Passing Away, through the Dark Night, to High Equanimity and the first taste of Stream Entry. These are perfect correlations also, and thus have already been described. Third Path is the Path of Seeing, and encompasses Stream Entry, and then begins the Fourth Path, that of Meditation, which encompasses the rest of the Ten Bhumis. Third Path is described as a plane taking off, and Fourth

Path as it flying higher and higher. Fifth Path is that of Buddhahood. As you can see, the Five Path Model does not really add anything to the other models, but knowing it will help you understand the correlations between the terminology when you are trying to cross over between the writings and oral teachings of various traditions. Back to the generic models…

THE ENERGETIC MODELS

In nearly the same vein as the Power Models are the Energetic Models. They tend to involve ideals that imply that enlightened beings will have all their energy channels clear, their chakras or energy centers all the right shape and color and all spinning in the correct direction, their aura large, regular, and some nice color such as white, gold or violet, and in general have perfected their energetic system, regardless of the particular energetic system model being used. The simple fact of multiple models and visions of what a perfected system should look like is already a red flag for anyone paying attention, as the various traditions can't even agree on how many chakras there are, much less the rest of the details. I have noticed that these things are very scriptable, meaning that one's concepts of what is supposed to be happening can influence what one perceives in these areas. These models also leave much to be desired, and generally are referring to things that happen in the A&P

and the fourth jhana, as are the powers models.

Kundalini phenomena, where all the energy (prana, lung or chi) blasts through the central channel (shushumna), are very common in the A&P Event. Some traditions associate this event with awakening, though I consider this erroneous and premature, though I can understand why these stages impress people so much. It is during the A&P that some practitioners with a bent or talent for doing so may perceive energy channels, sometimes in outrageous detail, and be able to see chakras and the like. However, anyone who can do this in a sustained fashion will note the following: that in the Dark Night the channels are a mess in most people, and that in High Equanimity the focus shifts to experience itself, not nearly so much what is in that field of experience, and thus the channels can be difficult to perceive or a secondary background aspect of what is going on. Further, enlightened beings cycle all the time, their moods and health and other factors change all the time, and so what their channels are doing and how they perceive them will change all the time, leading to nothing resembling the stable, clean, orderly, perfected, predictable energetic state promised in the energetic models.

Thus, the energetic models are another example of a transient

side effect of some people's practice being incorporated into an ideal of 292

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment awakening. While energetic practices are very interesting and may lead to lots of insights and other nice effects, that is not the same thing as enlightened being having stable, perfected energetic systems. My friend Kenneth has asked me to add that there is something good that progressively awakening does to the channels and energetic system, and I have to agree. However, defining exactly what positive changes are made is difficult, and none of the models I have seen really do an adequate job or contain enough flexibility to accommodate how dynamic our energetic systems are. Suffice to say, this is one more set of models that is getting at something but contains much that needs revision.

THE SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE MODELS

Specific Knowledge Models basically state or imply that

enlightenment will somehow magically provide hidden conceptual information about all sorts of specific things in life, such as the workings of particle physics, how to bring about world peace, who one's disciples should marry, and the like. Some go further and state that

enlightenment progressively brings complete omniscience, meaning the ability to know everything about the whole universe simultaneously.

While these might seem to some people like reasonable things enlightened beings should somehow know, let's include other things it might be good to know, such as how to create safe, inexpensive lithium ion batteries for electric cars, how to consistently beat the return of an S&P 500 index fund over the long haul, how to balance the federal deficit while providing everyone with good social support but not raising taxes, how to instantaneously make every blue-collar Republican realize that they are voting against their own self-interest, and how to build a fusion reactor that is safe, inexpensive, produces enough energy for everyone, and has no radioactive disposal issues. When you look at these, the concept of specific knowledge gained by merely seeing the true nature of ordinary sensations begins to seem as ridiculous as it really is.

The only specific thing I did gain a little insight into was the beauty of differential equations that discuss the oscillation from the imaginary quantities (potential) to real quantities (manifestation), but that's about it. Other than a bunch of direct knowledge of how the mind works and 293

a whole lot of knowledge about what a load of crap most religious and mystical dogma is, and that includes Buddhist Dogma, I didn't

really get any specific knowledge of anything else. So much for that idea…

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS

Here is another thing that didn't happen: psychological perfection.

While the mainstream Western Buddhist world is absolutely drowning in notion that somehow Buddhist practice will either eliminate all their psychological "stuff" or cause them to become self-actualized in the good old psychoanalytical sense, nothing could be further from the truth except perhaps the Action Models. I think that I learned more about reasonable psychological health from reading one book on

Transactional Analysis (Vann Joines' TA Today) than I did from over a decade of highly successful Buddhist meditation. That doesn't mean that I have achieved perfect psychological health, not by a long shot!

Focusing on psychological growth is an epidemic disease in Western insight practice. Many of the major retreat centers that purport to foster insight practice in the US and Europe are actually bastions of the worst pop psychological bullshit retrofitted with a bastardized Buddhist front.

You have only to go to a few small group meetings on retreats, as I mentioned in Part II, to hear that the vast majority of people who are supposed to be doing insight practices are actually just wallowing in their own neurotic crap. Sure, they may be highly intelligent, super sophisticated, fantastically well-rationalized, pseudo-Buddhist practitioners of the Great Sacred Neurotic Crap Wallow, but they are wallowing just the same.

As I mentioned before, that this sort of behavior is tolerated on meditation retreats at all is mind-boggling, but that it gets reinforced and rewarded as often as it does is a crying shame that reflects as badly on the teachers as it does the practitioners. I have had insight teacher after insight teacher try to focus on what I was feeling and how my relationships were going when all I wanted to do was talk about my attempts at insight practices, as I assumed, often wrongly, that they were insight teachers.

While the dharma is vast, and the teachings of the wisdom traditions contain a lot of material for helping grow psychologically, that doesn't mean that it has anything to do with awakening or insight practice at all, 294

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment and letting people get stuck there does them little service, if you ask me, which you clearly did, as you are reading this book. Again, as I said before, working on one's psychological stuff can have its value, but I firmly believe that

keeping the line between insight practice and psychological work drawn as firmly as possible is essential to doing either well.

Further, it is oh so easy to imagine that the teachers on the front cushion couldn't possibly be as neurotic as we are, and before you know it we have the breeding ground for massive shadow sides, exploitation, isolation, and scandal just like we had with the models that purport emotional perfection. The Jet Set culture of teachers popping in, getting up on the front cushion, spouting their beautiful ideals, and jetting off to somewhere else before anyone can see them as the humans they really are only goes to reinforce these dangerous notions. It is just so easy to project all kinds of wondrous qualities on to them when the dream is so nicely laid out and the opportunities for reality testing so few. Clearly, that suits most of them just fine, or they would go more out of their way to counter those notions, but, as they quickly learn, countering those notions just doesn't sell, and getting caught up in that sort of transference feels mighty friggin' nice.

Thus, I think that the models that reinforce the notion that psychological perfection or freedom from our psychological stuff will come simply by seeing through the sense of a separate, permanent agent are a serious problem for these major reasons:

1) They simply aren't true.

2) They cause practitioners to get caught up in their stuff rather than focusing on the Three Characteristics or something equivalent, thus squandering the vast majority of Western Buddhist practitioner's scant retreat and practice time.

3) They allow teachers to be able to ride the hot air of these preposterous ideals to dangerous heights.

4) They contribute to the erroneous sense of the gap between this ordinary, human existence and awakening by creating unrealistic ideals and goals.

Most Buddhist practitioners that I know have something like one of the following belief structures:

1) That awakening is impossible, so the best thing to try for is psychological or emotional health or perfection.

2) That awakening is psychological or emotional perfection, so by trying for psychological or emotional perfection one is doing the practices that lead to awakening.

3) That awakening involves psychological or emotional perfection, so it clearly is impossible, and by sitting they are trying to accomplish something else, but if you ask them what that is they are usually unable to answer clearly.

What is so ironic is that awakening is hard but clearly not

impossible, and not nearly as impossible as achieving psychological or emotional perfection. In fact, seeing sensations clearly enough to see that they are all just happening and coming and going is extremely straightforward once you finally realize that is what you are supposed to be doing. Further, when I think back on all the things I have done, including going to medical school, spending a year in India working as a volunteer there, and finishing a medical residency, I must say that the work I went through to get those things was significantly more than the work it took to get to stream entry and even arahatship. It is not that getting stream entry was easy, just not as hard as plenty of other things I have done. I attribute my success to a vast array of factors, but two that are relevant here are a tolerance for pain and having a good working model. That model was one that was blissfully free of the notion of emotional or psychological perfection.

When I think about what it would take to achieve freedom from all psychological stuff, the response that comes is this: life is about stuff.

Stuff is part of being alive. There is no way out of this while you are still living. There will be confusion, pain, miscommunication,

misinterpretation, maladaptive patterns of behavior, unhelpful emotional reactions, weird personality traits, neurosis and possibly much worse. There will be power plays, twisted psychological games, people with major personality disorders (which may include you), and craziness. The injuries continue right along with the healing and eventually the injuries win and we die. This is a fundamental teaching of the Buddha. I wish the whole Western Buddhist World would just get over this notion that these practices are all about getting to our Happy 296

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment Place where nothing can ever hurt us or make us neurotic and move on to actually mastering real Buddhist practice rather than chasing some ideal that will never appear.

All that said, there is some debate about what factors or progress allows some people to just notice the Three Characteristics of the sensations that make up their world in the fact of their stuff as opposed to those who just flounder in their stuff. Some would argue that you have to have done enough psychological work and deal with enough of your issues to get to the place were you can move on to the next stage. I must reluctantly admit that there is probably some truth to this.

However, I didn't consider myself particularly psychologically advanced when I started insight practices, as I had all kinds of stuff to deal with and still do, and yet somehow, perhaps through good

instruction, perhaps through some other factors I have yet to identify, I was able to practice well despite it all and make the shift from being lost in content to noticing how things actually are.

THE THOUGHT MODELS

Speaking screwed up models, we have the Thought Models. These are models that tend to focus on something different happening with thoughts in those who are awakened, rather than simply seeing through the thought patterns that create a sense of a center point or special, permanent, separate self. These idealized models include not thinking certain thoughts, such as enlightened beings being unable to think the thought “I” or “I am”, not thinking at all and thus stopping the process of thought, or some other modification to thoughts, such always thinking good thoughts, whatever those are.

I got an email a while ago from a seemingly nice engineer who said basically: “I did some Taoist practices, got enlightened, and now am incapable of thinking any thoughts or visualizing, yet I seem to function normally. What do you think of this?” I put a lot of thought into my response, and so am including it here, in slightly edited form:

“One of my dead teachers, Bill Hamilton, used to talk about how people's conceptions of what was supposed to happen would have some influence on subsequent events, with some question about what that influence was. We used to discuss this often, with possibilities including: 297

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

1) People with different models of awakening might actually achieve different results. I am no fan of this proposition but admit the possibility.

2) People with different models might achieve the same thing but describe it differently. I believe this one more than the first.

3) Some combination of these.

4) People might fail to achieve results but be scripted to report or believe that they had achieved something in line with their own working model. This is a common occurrence, one that I have observed in myself more times than I can count and also in the practice of many other fellow dharma adventurers. Bill would often mention people's ability to self hypnotize into semi-fixed states of delusion. He had a long run of hanging out in scary cult-like situations with psychopathic teachers and got to observe this first hand in himself and others: see his book Saints and Psychopaths for more on this.

5) People with different models and techniques might have very different experiences of the path along its way: this is clearly true in some aspects, and yet the universal aspects of the path continue to impress me with their consistency and reproducibility regardless of

tradition.

6) Other possibilities we hadn't considered, in the style of Donald Rumsfeld's famous Unknown Unknowns…

The "no thought" question is an interesting one. It is commonly used in some traditions as being the goal, these including some strains and descriptions of Hindu Vedanta, multiple non-aligned traditions, and others. Zen sometimes toys with the idea on its periphery. As to Taoism: I did a bunch of reading of the old Taoist masters some years ago, but I wouldn't consider myself an expert on it's current practice or dogma.

Buddhism does not generally consider not thinking or not being able to visualize among its goals, which brings us to the points mentioned above. For instance, the Awakened Buddha often says things in the old texts like, "It occurred to me that I should wander by stages to

[such and such a place]." Or, "This spontaneous stanza, never heard before, occurred to me." These obviously are thoughts. Furthermore, if we note the old texts as reference, all of the enlightened disciples of the 298

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment Buddha and the Buddha himself were described as thinking thoughts.

Further, many of the Buddha's disciples could visualize, as could the Buddha, and if we look to modern times you can't be a tantric master without some strong visualization abilities.

Further, the notion that one can write an email or do engineering, which inherently involves abstraction (mathematics) and other concepts being converted into actuality, or even speak and have it not involve thought, is one that I think is merely a conceptual understanding itself and thus an arbitrary designation. Further, as intentions fall into the realm of thought, and all physical actions are preceded by intentions by the fixed mechanics of the system, the notion that action can occur without thought falls into the same camp. This also applies to all such things as memory, which you clearly demonstrate, as this inherently must involve thought essentially by definition (with caveats as above).

Given those assumptions, the question I ask is: have you simply stopped calling those processes "thought" so as to fit with an arbitrary and dogmatic model? Perhaps have you forced yourself to stop noticing that mental processes occur as you thought that was supposed to happen? Maybe you have achieved something real and because of your preconceptions choose to describe it through that terminological filter, or have achieved something completely different from those that is not on my radar screen for whatever reason, possibilities including my own delusion or lack of experience, just for

the sake of completion and reasonable skeptical doubt, which is always a good idea.

The terminology that I am used to involves seeing thoughts as they are, thus having them be just a very small and transient part of the natural, causal field of experience. However, it must also be admitted that, since thoughts can only be experienced as aspects of the other five sense doors, then labeling thought as thought is also just an abstraction and just as arbitrary as is labeling the other 5 sense doors as such. These are simply convenient designations (thoughts) for the sake of discussion.

When one notices that all things simply arise on their own,

including those sensations that may or may not be designated as thoughts, to be empty of a self, as they are and always have been, with no separate or independent observer or controller or doer that is not just a part of the field of experience or manifestation, then one has

understood at some level what the Buddha advocated that people understand. Thus, the model that I prefer, as it is practical, non-esoteric and direct, is that:

1) Sensations that can be labeled as thoughts occur.

2) Thoughts are natural, causal, and essential to nearly every function we perform.

3) Thoughts are not self, not other, part of life, and empty in the good sense.

4) They always have been this way, before and after any spiritual achievement, and when their true nature is seen, they are still as they were.

An essential question regarding enlightenment is: does it make things different from how they were, or does it merely reveal a true and accurate perception or perspective on how everything always was? I advocate a moderated version of the latter view, as I believe it is more helpful to practice and more accurate. Thus, in this view, which is just one view, anything that could happen before, such as thought or visualization, can happen after, with the only thing changing being some untangling of the previously held knot of tangled perception.

In terms of my experience, another interesting conceptual

designation, and using relative and down-to-earth language, I can make my inner voice as loud as it could be before, it is much more clear than it was before, it is perceived as part of the natural field of causality in a way that it was not before, and mindfulness comes and goes as before.

In high jhanic states the inner voice is very subtle, but I can still

visualize as before, sometimes with even more clarity depending on practice conditions. In short, I have not lost abilities nor have I changed much about the way the system operates. That said, something is clear that was not clear before, and the sense of a special center point seems seen through, though the sensate patterns that made it up generally seem to still occur as before, and it is only the perception of them that is different." (end of email)

As you can see, I sometimes write long emails for worthy dharma questions, but must admit I only have the time to do this because the number of people who ask me questions as of this point is so very small.

Anyway, back to the models…

300

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment THE GOD MODELS

On a very different tangent, we have the God Models. While

Buddhism pretends to be an exception to the theological traditions, many Buddhists essentially worship the Buddha as a God just as Christians worship Jesus as a God. Further, the vast majority of the traditions that promote awakening involve some sort of theological background or underpinning, including Hindu Vedanta's focus on the divine nature of things, Islam's Sufi's focusing on The Friend or dissolving in Allah, and Christianity's various dissolution in God metaphors, such as the Divine Marriage. Buddhism has the same problem at times with the phrase Buddha Nature. These are interesting models to talk about, and basically the question comes down to the distance between "God" and one's life. Those who believe in a God that is a separate entity are already in trouble. Those who believe this entity is far off in Heaven or largely unavailable are really in trouble. However, those who believe in a "God" that is right here, right now, and present in all things, including themselves, have a fighting chance, and this is as practical a model for awakening as any other, if done correctly, which it almost never is.

The problem comes for those who believe in God Free Zones, that is, those places where God is not. These tend to be people who believe in a limited, abstract God. Most people who believe in God have not taken the time to consider the question of whether or not they believe in God Free Zones or a limited God. In fact, most people who believe in God in the monotheistic sense would be offended by the notion that their God was somehow limited. However, if you question them about whether or not God is in their toilet paper or in a rock, or perhaps more specifically IS the toilet paper, and is the rock, is their weird popcorn fetish, is the annoying itch in their armpit, and actually is everything else, even most people who in theory believe in an omnipresent, unlimited, all-powerful God won't go that far. This is too

bad, because if they did, they would have a good working model for realizing that THIS IS IT, and so we are back to my original, simple, excellent premise and test for good models of awakening.

Here's how this works: if you believe that you are trying to see God, and you believe that all creation is a manifestation not just created by 301

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

God, but in fact IS GOD, they you are back to basic insight practices: seeing the sensate world exactly as it is, because there you will find ultimate reality, or "God", if you want to call it that. When the center point is seen through by your careful investigation of all these sensations, or all the aspects of God, then all that is left is just all these sensations as before, that is, all this God. Thus, if one is willing to really believe in a omnipresent God, then by truly, deeply, directly perceiving all sensations to be just part of the causal, natural unfolding of what they label God, all the boundaries between what were self and other can be seen through, and the phenomenal world is left doing its thing, thus the practitioner realizes they always were part of God, in a sense, though these designations are merely terminological one way or the other.

Thus, the problem with God models typically is that people don't take them far enough, because if they do they can get into something really good, though they could get their just as easily without them. All the other ideals that are involved in becoming God or seeing God are just more odd dreams and possible side effects of spiritual practice. I have a few friends who saw visions while on LSD in which "God" told them useful stuff, and this is fine, but this is back in the realm of the powers and has nothing to do with awakening and only a very limited amount to do with "God" in the ultimate sense.

THE PHYSICAL MODELS

On a completely different track we have the Physical Models, which tend to involve some kind of physical perfection or stylization. The old Theravada texts go to great lengths to list the 32 interesting physical qualities of the Buddha, such as having 40 teeth and arms so long that he could touch his knees without bending down. It is interesting how things change, as in our modern context that would make him look more to us like a dentally challenged Cro-Magnon than a spiritual superhero, but I digress.

Numerous pop culture sources make us associate interesting

physical qualities or ideals with spirituality, particularly yoga magazines and martial arts movies. There is not much more to say about these models other than they are amusing and completely inaccurate. We may imagine that somehow enlightenment involves some kind of physical health, or think that awakening or insight

practice may cure 302

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment some illness, but I wouldn't bank on anything like this at all. That said, my friends who regularly do practices like yoga and Tai Chi do tend to look good, and this only makes sense. However, this is not related to ultimate realizations except peripherally in that those practices involve mindfulness and if done well can lead to real insights.

THE RADIANCE MODELS

Related to the Physical Models are the Radiance Models, which tend to involve imagining that enlightened beings will have some kind of remarkable presence, usually involving radiating love, charisma, wisdom, peace or even physical light. A friend of mine used to joke about this by saying that people in Western Vipassana at the Insight Meditation Society thought that an arahat would be someone like Dipa Ma (a talented practitioner of vipassana and samatha who died an anagami by her own admission) but with light shining out of their ass.

This is a bit of an exaggeration, but it makes the point that these ideals are so ingrained in us from many traditions that it is hard to not imagine that enlightened beings must have something remarkable about them that you could feel or see.

Everyone knows that all saints have light coming out of their heads, as did Jesus. You have only to look to medieval paintings to confirm this. The stories of the Buddha are full of his marvelous presence. In fact, his very first interaction with a human after his awakening went something like this. The Buddha had gotten up after exploring the depths of his realization and abilities. He decided to go try to find his five companions who had been with him during his period of grave asceticism, and surveying the world with his psychic powers found they were at Benares. He took off walking down the road between Bodh Gaya and Gaya, and the first person the Buddha talked to after his awakening that wasn't a god or a giant snake was the monk Upaka. I quote the Buddha as he tells the tale, as rendered in Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi's The

Middle Length

Discourses of the Buddha ,

Sutta 26, as it is so priceless and such a wealth of information about the origin of these models and ideals:

[Upaka said] 'Friend, your faculties are clear, the color of your skin is pure and bright. Under whom have you gone forth,

friend? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you profess?'

I [The Buddha] replied to the Ajivaka Upaka in the stanzas:

'I am one who has transcended all, a knower of all,
Unsullied among all things, renouncing all,
By craving's ceasing freed. Having known this all
For myself, to whom should I point as teacher?
I have no teacher, and one like me
Exists nowhere in all the world
With all its gods, because I have
No person for my counterpart.
I am the Accomplished One in the world
I am the Teacher Supreme.
I alone am a Fully Enlightened One
Whose fires are quenched and extinguished.
I go now to the city of Kasi
To set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma.
In a world that has become blind
I go to beat the drum of the Deathless.'

[Upaka replied] 'By your claims friend, you ought to be the Universal Victor.'

'The victors are those like me
Who have won to destruction of taints.
I have vanquished all evil states,
Therefore, Upaka, I am a victor.'

The passage is remarkable in that it sets out a large number of criteria and specifics about what awakening means to the Buddha and to Buddhism in such a short space. Further, what is interesting is the 304

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment number of times the word "I" appears. In fact, "Buddha" means something like Awakened One, or "I am awake." Thus, we see that the Buddha had no trouble talking about what he had done and who he was, nor did he have trouble thinking the thought "I".

We note his remarkable presence and skin, and so have the first of the Buddhist Radiance Models and Physical Models. We note that he says he is superior to the Gods, which is sort of a God Model in and of itself, except one better. He describes being free of all the taints and evil states, which is a complex mix of Emotional and Psychological Models.

He also adds the drum of the Deathless, and here we have hints of an Immortality Model or an Extinction Model, and while formally Buddhism would reject both of these associations, aspects of both show up often in the texts anyway. There is also a Transcendence

Model, as he says he is unsullied by all things, and also a Specific Knowledge Model, as the Buddha says he is a knower of all. In short, he says he has accomplished something remarkable, and asserts that he is going to go tell others how to do exactly the same thing he did, or is he?

The question of how the Buddha's realization relates to what he was trying to teacher others is a complex one. There are numerous passages where he says he is quite different from and superior to all other enlightened beings, and draws a clear line between himself and arahats.

Thus, we have to look carefully at what his claims about himself have to do with others, and I devote the whole next chapter to this complex issue. Suffice to say, the problem comes in when the ideals the Buddha discusses as applying to himself, however mythologized we think they are, are applied without careful investigation to enlightened beings of theoretically inferior degree. Then there is the slippery question of the Tibetans who purport to produce full Buddhas in one lifetime…

Back to the issues of whether or not enlightened beings have a special presence. I have seen examples of both, though I suspect that in most cases their presence was largely that way before they started doing spiritual practice. Many people who have asked me questions about practice over the years have hesitantly asked me if there was something remarkable about my presence or how I was able to keep my

realizations hidden at work. I am both sorry and happy to report that I have no problems in this regard at work and as far as I can tell have 305

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

nothing whatsoever that is unusual about my presence that wasn't there long before I got into all of this, other than the confidence and passion with which I speak on the dharma. In short, the physical models and radiance are just nice propaganda and another trap that people fall into, both in their own practice and when evaluating the possible level of realization of others.

THE KARMA MODELS

Karma models involve the promise that somehow realization

eliminates, exhausts, cancels out or moderates the forces of causality that would cause bad things to happen to the realized being. Karma involves action and its consequences, and in its simplest form is essentially the statement that causes lead to effects in a lawful way. The subject is imponderable, as the forces and factors involved are so vast and complex that no mind can fully comprehend them. That said, many models and Buddhist ideals subtly or overtly present models of

awakening that promise some sort of relief or freedom from adversity.

However, if we look to the life of the Buddha, who by definition is as enlightened as it gets in Buddhism, lots of bad things happened to him, at least according to the texts. He had chronic headaches and back pain, got illnesses, was attacked by bandits, people tried to kill him, his own order broke into warring factions, people harassed him, and so forth and so on. Thus, it is clear that even the Buddha was not free from the laws of karma, and so it would seem naïve to assume that we were also.

However, the karma models raise an interesting question, that of the timing of the fulfillment of the promises of enlightenment and what this has to do with death. The Theravada claims that the moment of complete freedom from suffering is at the death of an arahat or Buddha, as it is only then that there is no more coming into further birth and there is the complete cessation of the senses that cause pain and discomfort. The Tibetans would disagree, focusing on the perpetual life or continued series of rebirths of a Buddha or Bodhisattva throughout time to help awaken other beings. These conflicts bring us to other models, but in fact are paradoxes created by misperception.

However, the karma models are not entirely junk. By seeing each thought, state and emotion as it is, there is an increased ability to simply 306

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment watch these arise and vanish on their own, thus allowing for the causal force of them to not wash through to the future without some moderation of intelligence and wisdom. In this way, past causes, habits, tendencies and the like can be mitigated through clear seeing, and the actions we take based on these that create future causes can be done with more awareness, clarity, and a broader, more inclusive perspective.

This is not the same thing as eliminating all “negative” karma, but it is practical, realistic and verifiable, and thus represents the grain of truth found in the Karma Models.

THE PERPETUAL BLISS MODELS

Perpetual Bliss Models focus on enlightenment bringing on a state of continuous happiness, peace, joy, or bliss. These are commonly found in Hinduism, though they are in full force in Buddhism and other traditions as well, e.g. Christianity’s “the peace that passes all understanding.” Buddhism often describes Nirvana (Nibbana) as synonymous with the highest happiness and the end of suffering, and this end of suffering is the natural corollary of the Perpetual Bliss Models. Perpetual Bliss Models and their corollaries are so pervasive in the world of awakening as to be a central, nearly unassailable tenant of most people’s core beliefs. I am sorry to say, they need

serious revision.

The first point is that about impermanence. Bliss, peace, happiness, as well as their counterparts pain, chaos, and misery, are all transient phenomena, subject to conditions, arising and passing like the weather.

As Zen says, the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows march through our lives according to the laws of reality that have always been in place. This returns us to the great question of realization: does realization change things or does realization reveal how things always were? I advocate a modified version of the latter view, both for practice and for having sane models, but the dogma and those selling something often stray into the promises of a radically different and better existence.

The standard Buddhist argument is that by removing the condition, namely ignorance or misperception, the suffering caused by this condition is also removed. The question then is how much suffering is caused by that particular condition and how much is caused by just being alive. I assert that most of our suffering is caused by simply being alive, but must concede that there is something about changing 307

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

something in the relationship to the ordinary facts of life and humanity that does help, and why I am so reluctant to admit that there is some sort of peace that comes from realization is a question I am still looking into. While I strongly believe that there are practical reasons not to sell things in this way, I suspect that some residual quirk of my personality is also at play here, and you may have already come to that conclusion.

The other side of the Perpetual Bliss Models is the notion that somehow one will enter into a permanent jhanic state, such as the 4th jhana or some sort of Nibbanic jhana. These versions of the bliss models imply perfect, continuous concentration untouched by

circumstance or enhanced by some sort of inborn wellspring of jhanic qualities. As noted above, all the concentration states are temporary, not related directly to realization, attained both by some who are enlightened and some who are not, and thus are a false promise.

However, as so many people get a taste of jhana and are sure this must just get better and more continuous as they progress, they end up cultivating these states again and again and get nowhere in insight practice. Further, why would someone who was hanging onto a bliss model want to look into suffering? They don't, and so the chances of them coming into real insight territory or handling the Dark Night well are slim. Now, it is true that there is some sort of relationship

between the perspective on things that occurs in the first four jhanas and the four paths, and the panoramic perspective of both the fourth samatha jhana and the panoramic perspective of arahatship share some positive aspects in common, but they are not the same thing, and even mentioning these patterns and parallels is dangerous, as it can cause a lot of misguided effort and assessment of where people are on the path. I think that this is a good place to introduce the Tibetan concept of the Three Kayas, as it has some useful aspects that help make sense of these things.

THE THREE KAYAS

Contrary to what some Tibetan Buddhists would tell you, arahats have a deep understanding of what is meant by their teaching of the Three Kayas or "Bodies of Understanding." For me, the Three Kayas are very close in meaning and implication to the scopes of the Three Trainings. Arahats understand the fullness of the implications of having been born and of there still being a body and mind (called the

"nirmanakaya" or "manifestation body"), relating to training in morality.

All teachings of dependent arising, interconnection and interdependence fall into the realm of the nirmanakaya.

Arahats know intimately the fullness of the ordinary realities of the human condition: sickness (physical and mental), health, sorrow, joy, conflict, harmony, pleasure, pain, clarity and confusion, stupidity and brilliance. All of these manifest according to the same natural laws that have always been in effect, contrary to popular belief. A body was born and it will get sick and die. The Eight Worldly Winds of praise and blame, fame and ill repute, success and failure, and gain and loss still blow impersonally as always. The laws of biochemistry, physics and physiology still hold. We still have to pay taxes. From a cynic's point of view, the nirmanakaya is the most disappointing aspect of

enlightenment. Did one really imagine that somehow it would be otherwise? Don't believe the hype! Another of the great Bill Hamilton one-liners was, "Suffering less, noticing it more." The more we wake up, the more we notice exactly what it means to have been born.

The nirmanakaya is what is meant by this passage pertaining to the arahat: "The disturbances resulting from the taint of being can no longer be found here, the disturbances related to the taint of attraction can no longer be found here, the disturbances related to the taint of aversion can no longer be found here, and yet there remains the disturbances inherent in these six sense doors that are dependent on a body and conditioned by life", from Sutta #121, The Shorter

Discourse on Voidness, in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. Notice that this says, “six sense doors.” Arahats still think, contrary to occasional myths about “stopping thought”, as noted above. While the content of thoughts is still inherently dual, the true nature of the way thoughts manifest is absolutely non-dual. Arahats know both aspects of thought directly, a bit like being able to see waves on the ocean and yet also that the whole thing is made of water and intimately connected. No wave would ever be fooled into thinking that one wave was watching, controlling, or isolated from another.

The nirmanakaya is also the aspect of understanding that has to do with personality, habits and issues of character. Don’t imagine that just by understanding the full ultimate truth of phenomena that these things 309

will somehow lose their considerable causal inertia. To paraphrase Chi Nul, a great Korean Chan monk, just because the Sun is shining brightly doesn’t mean that all the snow will instantly melt.

On a related theme, the nirmanakaya also relates to the facts of the physiological inertia and biological conditioning of the bodily aspects of the emotional life. The mind of a true arahat is extremely resilient, but the flesh works according to the same laws that were in place before.

The spacious mental resilience of an arahat has some positive consequences for physical life, but it does not completely transform it.

Thus, physical sensations associated with hunger, pain, tiredness, sexual arousal, nervousness, fear and all the rest are still intimate realities for the living arahat when they arise and are not inconsequential, though the points made above in the Karma model about seeing things arise and vanish still apply. The nirmanakaya includes issues of biochemistry and neurochemistry, and all of the issues of mental pathology that may go along with these.

The nirmanakaya bears out the truth so well articulated by Lao Tzu when he talked about dark and light containing one another and difficulty and ease complementing one another. No level of

enlightenment will allow one to just pick one’s favorite half of reality or humanity and eradicate the rest. This simply never happens and is not possible.

I think that everyone on the spiritual path should occasionally sit down with a piece of paper and list their favorite half of reality that they imagine or wish would be left if they got fully enlightened, and then list all the aspects of reality that they wish or “know” would vanish forever.

They should then list the things that they imagine would show up as a result of full realization that are not here now. The differences

between these lists often point directly to what blocks the development of wisdom from clear acceptance and understanding of reality.

Even arahats and buddhas have a favorite half of reality as well as dreams about how things could be, so these dreams are not the problem. The difference is that highly realized beings understand directly that both the “good” and “bad” halves are of the nature of ultimate truth, including all thoughts about them, and this makes all the difference. These sensations flicker effortlessly and vanish, getting no 310

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment more nor less consideration than they are due. The point I am trying to make here is to include the sensations that make up your world in your practice, and don’t retreat into idealized fantasies of what realization will be like, though notice such sensations if and when they occur.

Lastly, the nirmanakaya relates to our “stuff,” our issues, our childhood traumas, our dark secrets. I have routinely mentioned that when doing insight practices one should try to see these things at the moment-to-moment level. However, one must also find a way to deal with our stuff in the traditional ways, or perhaps non-traditional ones.

Just do this work when not doing insight practices. While there are connections between these two types of work, they are often in direct conflict. Make time for the macroscopic, when we face and learn about how to live well in the world in terms of emotions, issues, conflicts, tears, joys, people, jobs and relationships. However, also make time during which you resolutely put all of that behind you, time when you stay at the level of flickering sensations. Unhealthy fixation on either perspective is guaranteed to cause problems.

Arahats also have a wondrous understanding of all of this that is unique to them and buddhas (though there may be hints of it at third path) called the “sambhogakaya.” They know that the full range of phenomenal reality and even the full range of the emotional life can be deeply appreciated for what it is. They see that the world of concepts, language, symbols, visions, thoughts and dreams is fundamentally the same as the world of materiality, that they both share the same essential nature from an experiential point of view. The first line of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning there was the word, and the word was God,” is a nice way to put it. For those who find this phrase too cryptic, I paraphrase it as: “From the beginning, concepts, words, dreams, visions, and the realm of thought have always been an aspect of ultimate reality.”

Further, in some strange way even the worst of the world has a richness of texture that can be deeply enjoyed, and a mysterious and sometimes awe-inspiring glory mixed into it, inherent in it. What they

were looking for was permeating all the sensations without exception that had made up their world all along! What staggering irony this is, and what a silent joy it is to discover this at last. This is what is meant by 311

"the bliss of Nirvana." It is a more subtle understanding than the nirmanakaya and in some largely mysterious way does not contradict it.

Beyond even this, they also understand in real time what is meant by the dharmakaya, that somehow none of this is they, and that "what they are" cannot be fundamentally harmed, disturbed or affected by the world of phenomena in any way. The dharmakaya seems to

simultaneously pervade all of this, not be all of this, and be utterly beyond all of this. It seems to be permanent and yet unfindable, be empty and yet aware. Even this paradoxical language is hopelessly crude and from a certain point of view unnecessary, though an arahat would know directly what it is pointing to. This is what is meant by "going beyond birth and death," "Samsara is Nirvana," "the arahat is traceless here and now," "True Self" and "no-self." Interestingly, the nirmanakaya also relates directly to both "True Self" and "no-self."

There is something beautiful and yet tragic in this, a "dark comedy" as a friend of mine put it.

To even say that the dharmakaya is a very subtle understanding makes no sense, as the understanding of dharmakaya arises more from what is absent rather than a sense of the presence of something. On the other hand, the presence of everything bears witness to it.

All three understandings (the nirmanakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the dharmakaya) are accessible to the arahat at any time by the mere inclination towards them, which is to say these perspectives arise dependent on causes in their own time. They are three complementary perspectives on the same thing. It is like being able to see the validity of the perspective of all of the three people in the classic Taoist painting called "The Vinegar Tasters," with Confucius and his laws for living in the world relating to the nirmanakaya, Lao Tzu and his deep

appreciation of life relating to the sambhogakaya, and the Buddha and his emphasis on Nirvana and going beyond suffering, birth and death relating to the dharmakaya. Most people think of this painting as a Taoist slam on the other two traditions, but I think that the deeper meaning is much more useful.

The teaching of the Three Ultimate Dharmas of materiality,

mentality and Nibbana that I articulated earlier is closely related to the Tibetan concepts of the Three Kayas or aspects of the fully

enlightened 312

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment condition. The nirmanakaya relates to form, the sambhogakaya relates to the enjoyable, quiet and spacious peace of the fully enlightened mind that unifies the mental and physical into the same field of experience, and the dharmakaya relates to Nibbana.

Were only the nirmanakaya true, we could say that unitive

experiences are the answer and that we are the whole field of experience. Were only the dharmakaya true, we could say that transcendent "experiences" are the answer, that we create and know the whole field of experience, that we do not exist, and that we are the deathless or God. Neither of these frameworks can clearly explain things on their own, and so, as mentioned in the chapter called No-self vs. True Self, none of these descriptions really holds up to reality testing on its own.

Presenting the Three Kayas also allows me to continue to hammer relentlessly on the point about people wanting to find some spiritual reality other than this one. The huge temptation when walking the spiritual path is to try desperately to find a way to get the simple ease of the sambhogakaya and the indestructible, transcendent and deathless luminosity of the dharmakaya while secretly hoping that the down to earth, mundane, intimate, visceral, vulnerable, and often embarrassing nirmanakaya will just sort of crawl away and die or at least radically reform itself. The nirmanakaya is often treated as though it were the bastard stepchild of the fully enlightened condition, but you can't have one without the others. Intimacy with reality is bought at the price of attaining transcendence beyond reality. Transcendence is bought at the price of attaining intimacy with reality. These inescapable facts should not be forgotten.

The all too common temptation of those who advertise and sell spirituality is to sing the praises of the sambhogakaya and dharmakaya while trying to gloss over the profound yet down to earth implications of the nirmanakaya. Buyer beware! If enlightened beings didn't feel the fullness of their humanity and the ordinary world, compassion for themselves and others would be completely impossible. From a Tibetan point of view, it is because enlightened beings progressively lose their artificial defenses against the nirmanakaya that they have no choice but to be bodhisattvas, which brings us nicely to our next model…

313

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

THE IMMORTALITY MODELS

The Immortality Models are significantly more prevalent in Tibetan Buddhism than the other strains, thought they also appear in

Pure Land Buddhism and are found elsewhere. While all strains of Buddhism on the one hand categorically deny immortality as the goal based upon the standard tenants of Buddhist logic, plenty then turn around and sell immortality like used car salesmen. So many Buddhists want to be up in the Heaven called Nirvana as empty yet separate beings who don't exist and yet live forever as Bodhisattvas saving the world.

While there are lots of good points in the Bodhisattva Vows, this is yet another case of bait and switch where the results will be a bit more down to earth than most people are bargaining for. However, many Buddhists are so brainwashed into the ideal of becoming Amazing Super Beings that they readily give up the notion that they could really understand anything in this lifetime in exchange for the dream that some zillion lifetimes down the road they may get to be Spiritual Superstars. However, as their mentality can be essentially like people who have bought into some weird cult, I don't recommend trying to convince them otherwise, as it generally just pisses them off. Just do your practice, take care of your own understanding, and then see what you can do from there.

Now, as before, there is some weird truth to the immortality models on two fronts. First, from a technical point of view, what is traditionally called the Dharmakaya, Deathless, Nirvana, Tao, Void, Buddha Nature, etc. is indestructible, timeless, etc., but this is because it is not anything specific. This has already been discussed, and simply stated, from this point of view the notion of death or impermanence simply does not apply. The flip side of this, that of the ordinary, transient world, Nirmanakaya, etc., is that causality rings on indefinitely. This is an interesting way to look at things, and a very practical, insight-oriented way.

From the point of view of time, cause and effect, things ripple out into the universe like drops of water cause ripples in water. This process, that is to say the world and us, has always been empty. If we are anything, it is a pattern of rippling sensations arising from causes and effects and leading to causes and effects. Thus, we send ripples of

whatever and however we are out into the causal future. If we are enlightened, that is one aspect of what ripples out into the patterns we call time, and these ripples go on without definable end. Teachings of reincarnation are getting at this point in their somewhat problematic way. Thus, we see that there is something to the Immortality Models, but they are not very helpful for doing insight practices except to help one appreciate causality. I think they are much more useful for training in morality, despite their obvious paradigmatic problems.

One great traditional analogy goes as follows: If you lit a candle, then lit another candle with that candle and then blew out the first one, what is transmitted? This is causality without a permanent entity, resonance without continuity, an artificial but useful recognition of a pattern, and nothing more.

THE TRANSCENDENCE MODELS

Related to the Immortality and Bliss Models, we have the

Transcendence Models. These essentially promise that you will have the best of both worlds: you will get to be in the world while not of the world, be able to enjoy all pleasant things while being immune to pain and difficulty, and thus live in a protected state of partial, selective transcendence. A lot of people try to emulate such a state in their practice: when presented with suffering they either look away from it or try to make their attention so wide or vague that they don't notice it, and when pleasant things arise they try to hang on to those experiences and expand them. While such a perfectly natural thing to do, this is the exact reverse of insight practice, and yet they may deeply feel that this is practicing for the transcendence they have been promised.

As stated earlier, the predictable and obvious truth is that transcendence is bought at the price of a very deep, direct intimacy with life, all of life, both good and bad. Similarly, this deep intimacy with life is bought at the price of transcendence. While everyone nearly automatically looks to the good side of both, few consider that realization brings a deep, direct experience of all that is painful and also the reluctant understanding of how empty and ephemeral pleasure is.

One must be careful here, and I don't advocate buying into either extreme. Our ordinary lives have all this already, so don't look for something that is different from what is going on. Instead, look into your 315

life as it is and see the Three Characteristics of it directly, instant by instant. This is the gateway to the answer to the strange paradox that all this is pointing to.

THE EXTINCTION MODELS

On the flip side of the Immortality Models, and somewhat contrary to the Transcendence Models, we have the Extinction Models. These are essentially a promise that insight practices will either have you never be reborn again or will make you non-existent somehow in some ordinary sense. The first basic flaw in these models is that they presume an entity to which these things can occur, which from an insight point of view is already a problem. Insight practices at their best presume emptiness as always having been the case, and so to

posit that there is something that was reborn flies directly against their root premises.

Thus, the notion that there is someone who either will not be reborn again or will somehow cease to be (assuming they were "being" before), is absurd and doesn't belong in the language of ultimate wisdom.

However, page after page, Buddhism promises that there will be no more coming into any state of being, no more rebirth, no more self, and that somehow this will get someone off of the wheel of suffering.

Here we get into as gray an area as it gets in spiritual language.

Between the weird promises of the Immortality Models and the weird promises of the Extinction Models, we can really get into paradigmatic trouble. Somehow we are sure that one of these must be right, or maybe both are, or perhaps neither are, or some other combination we currently can't conceive of must be the correct one. However, all of these models are based upon a fundamental flaw, the misperception of sensations and the conclusion based on this misperception that there was some separate, permanent us that all these dualistic concepts can apply to. There is not, nor has their ever been, though sensations occur anyway. It is a convenient, practical, working assumption, a convention, a way of speaking, but nothing more. Thus, all of these curious notions simply do not apply. Simply practicing and perceiving sensations clearly reveals the way out of these paradoxes.

On a completely different note, there are the Love Models. These are hard to relate to any previous category except perhaps the Emotional Models, but they essentially involve some combination of us loving everyone, feeling love all the time, becoming Love itself, being loved by everyone, or some combination of these. The first two are commonly found in various references, such as Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj's famous quote, "Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between these two my life flows."

This is really not a bad quote as quotes go, as it tries to encompass the apparent paradoxes of spiritual understanding. It is basically a restatement of the Tibetan concept of balancing emptiness and compassion, and I like it for this reason. However, lots of people think that enlightened beings will be radiating love all the time, walking around saying loving things, feel profound love for all things at all times, and the like. Unfortunately, things couldn't be further from the truth.

While it does get sometimes easier to take the wider world of beings into consideration as the center point is seen through, this is

very different from walking around in a state of continuous love.

More sinister, deep, rarely articulated and yet compelling is the notion that somehow we will get enlightened and then people will not just like us, they will love us. Wow, does that one not withstand reality testing. Take the history of any of your favorite spiritual superheroes, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, St. John of the Cross, Rumi, etc. and notice the reactions people had to them. The notion that somehow you will be embraced, accepted, appreciated, respected, adored, cared for, or even liked by anyone just because of realization is, tragically, just another beautiful, delusional dream. In short, think twice before quitting your day job or walking down the middle of the street in your guru outfit proclaiming your realization for all to love.

Now, it is true that you can borrow a lot of pre-programmed respect from some people just by ordaining, which, viewed another way, means that ordination might get you the respect that your realization should, in some idealized universe, provide for you. However, this will be to a strangely select audience, and the games you have to participate in to be a part of that group are significant. You can also get a lot of respect by 317

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

getting on some senior teacher list, but there are subtle forces that then come to bear that will have you denying a lot of your own humanity when in public, thus leading to the shadow sides I mentioned above.

These points also hint at the Social Models that will follow in a bit.

THE UNITY MODELS

Related to the Love Models are the Unity Models, those that

promise a palpable sense of your connection to everything else. This is another one of those models that contains some sort of truth, but is in fact one far extreme side of the unity/extinction paradox. What we generally imagine is that we will stay an agent, a separate, conscious, in-control being and yet will be part of everything in some mysterious way, such as either feeling everything else at all times or even more ludicrous, being in control of everything else at all times. I have already spent a lot of time on this model in the section called No-Self vs. True Self and in previous models, so will move on with the simple statement that those that believe in unitive models are missing something fundamental.

THE SOCIAL MODELS

In the same vein as the Love Models are the Social Models. These tend to involve all sorts of social implications or issues around enlightenment. For instance, we may imagine that enlightenment will automatically have certain desirable social implications, such as being

accepted in a particular social role, such as that of a teacher, guide, mentor, spiritual friend, guru, leader, avatar, etc. This usually involves some poorly defined group of people accepting us. While spiritual attainments and unrelated qualities can sometimes inspire people to view us in these ways, there are absolutely no guarantees.

As I have pointed out before, plenty of people with wisdom have been ridiculed, ostracized, persecuted, attacked, jailed and murdered when they spoke from that place. In short, any social implications of one's realization (assuming one is correct in claiming or believing it) will be at the mercy of ordinary causal reality, just as with everything else, and ordinary causal reality can really suck sometimes. Further, the vast majority of people don't really have any clue what enlightenment is about, don't think that enlightenment really exists today, may not have enlightenment as part of their view of what possible or even desirable, 318

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment or may even find the notion that you think you are enlightened to be a threat to their religious beliefs or an indication of your grandiosity, arrogance, delusion, or psychosis. Having lived with these issues for over a decade, I can tell you that these reactions are as likely to be found in the social circles of Buddhism as they are in the social circles of any other meditative or non-meditative religious or non-religious tradition.

Other Social Models involve enlightenment having something to do with other people's opinions regarding whether or not we are enlightened, meaning that enlightenment is purely a social convention or collective designation and has nothing to do with reality or the individuals perception of it. In this model, just as we may elect a president (or at least believe we are casting votes for one), so it is with enlightenment. This is actually fairly common in a number of Western Buddhist circles, including some major retreat centers, in which they all bow to the senior teacher list and yet hold the paradigm that no one really gets enlightened. While all basically the neurosis of spiritual children, there are actually some real, practical truths hidden in this model.

While our direct perception of reality will depend on our practice and insights, any attempts at directly promoting similar insights in others will be greatly helped or hindered by what people think of us, whether or not we are given some title, whether or not a lineage accepts us as a teacher in that lineage, and whether or not the concepts and language we use to describe and sell our realization fit in with the cultural expectations and norms of our social circles. Further, there are those who falsely think they are enlightened because someone else thinks they are, and plenty of people on senior teacher

lists that probably shouldn't be there.

One way or another, it is worth examining our deepest beliefs regarding the social implications we imagine will occur when we get enlightened or more enlightened. These can have a big impact on our practice, our motivation to practice, and what kind of successes and failures we have in spreading insights around once we have insights ourselves. Unfortunately, most of our beliefs are likely to be somewhat unrealistic, springing from the understandable human need for 319

recognition, role, and social status. Again, the further we find our dreams from our current reality, the more we need to look at what is happening right now, with those dreams and needs being one small part of the transient, causal sensations that are arising and vanishing.

Stated in practical terms and by way of example, you could be a foreign medical grad that had trained well in some foreign school, completed a good foreign residency, be perfectly qualified to practice from the point of view of knowledge, experience and talent, and yet not be allowed to practice in the United States until you had jumped through all the hoops. The same problem can arise when people go outside of a tradition or partially outside it and yet do very good insight work. They have the knowledge but not the social designation. Like the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz who lacks a diploma, those who are enlightened who have not gone through standard channels can run into problems. That said, it also gives the freedom to speak out without worrying about those channels liking what you say, and there is much about the standard channels to speak out about.

I myself exist in a gray area like this, as do many modern teachers. I have accomplished much using the techniques of the Theravada, a tradition that explicitly says that only monks can know what I know and usually only recognizes monks as lineage holders. This is a cultural and social problem, and highlights the truth embodied in the social models.

I suspect there will be a lot more of this as the dharma moves into the modern era and more people are successful. We need to come up with solutions to this problem that neither artificially elevate people nor artificially prevent them from sharing what is they know that is of benefit to others.

THE THREE YANAS

While I am generally a die-hard fan of the Theravada, I have a great appreciation for much of the rest of Buddhism and the world's other great mystical traditions. In that spirit, I offer the following. Traditional Tibetan training is broken down into Three Yanas or vehicles: the Hinayana, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana. These correspond very nicely to the needs of practitioners at various stages

of the Simple Model presented above.

320

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment The Hinayana is a set of techniques and practices that closely resembles many of the traditional trainings of the Theravada, and these are often confused for this reason. (There are some historical relationships between the two that I do not wish to go into.) The Hinayana's emphasis is on basic morality, stabilizing the mind, and looking into the Three Characteristics, i.e. all of the fundamental practices and emphases that I mentioned in Part I. It is designed to get a person to the first stage of awakening, i.e. first path, which the Tibetans would call third path in the Tibetan Five Path Mode, or attaining the first bhumi.

Getting to the next stage of the simple model or third path involves a deep appreciation of interconnectedness in real time and a willingness to surrender to it. The Mahayana path provides methods for

understanding this in abundance with its strong emphasis on helping others and on the intrinsic emptiness ("shunyata") of phenomena. The Bodhisattva Vow, a fundamental part of the Mahayana path, not only expresses a deep willingness to surrender to and understand

interconnectedness, but its emphasis on not becoming a full buddha can help people get away from the temptation of purely future-oriented goals and grandiose visions of perfection that can still be quite a challenge at this stage.

To get to the next stage, one must completely understand the intrinsic luminosity of all phenomena without exception. The Vajrayana path, with its emphasis on intrinsic luminosity and Tantric techniques that work with the awakened nature of the fullness of the emotional range, fits very well with the needs of one trying to gain the final understanding that emptiness is form. Dzogchen teachings also explicitly emphasize inherent luminosity and that all things are of the nature of truth.

I am still a big fan of the Theravada, obviously, but I have a strong appreciation for the tailored beauty of the Three Yana system of the Tibetans. It has an uncanny sophistication to it and is part of what happens naturally even if you are following Theravada techniques. I am also a big fan of Zen, particularly its strong emphasis on keeping things down to Earth, e.g. "After enlightenment, the laundry." If you learn any of these traditions well, you will come to see that they each contain the 321

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment

others. As always, it is not the tradition that is important, but that it work for you.

In short, the non-duality models are the only models of awakening that hold up without apology, qualification or exception. The rest of the models have serious problems, though each may contain some amount of truth in it, however poorly conveyed. Given sufficient experience of the real world, those who believe in literal interpretations of such confused models as the limited emotional range models and limited possible action models will either:

1) Be forced to come to the conclusion that no living being meets their definitions of enlightenment,

2) Be forced into a dark corner of borderline-psychotic rationalizations of what actually happens, or

3) Be headed for a very rude awakening indeed, to make a bit of a bad pun.

There is only one thing worse in my mind than students getting caught up in the dogma of the worst of the models, and that is realized teachers getting caught by them. Just as it is disappointing when those with long retreat resumes but no fundamental insight want to encourage faith in their beautiful tradition by appearing to know more than they actually do, it is doubly disappointing when realized beings can get caught in these fallacious models, acting as if they worked in the fantasy-land way that most people think they do. I know exactly where they are coming from and how tempting this is, but I dream of a day when such things never happen. The dharma world would be so much better off if teachers were honest about what realization is and ain't, both with their students and also with themselves. Don't think this sort of dishonesty doesn't occur. I have seen some of my very best and most realized teachers fall into this trap and have also done so myself more times than I can count. Learn from those who have had to learn the hard way and are willing to admit this.

DITCHING OUR "STUFF" VS. DITCHING THE SPLIT

While these two models are stated implicitly above, I thought I would summarize them again to make sure that I have made this important point clear. There are models of awakening that involve getting rid of all of our "stuff", i.e. our issues, flaws, quirks, pains, 322

 negative emotions, traumas, personalities, cultural baggage, childhood scars, relationship difficulties, insecurities, fears, strange notions, etc.

Such models underlie most of the mainstream visions of spiritual attainment.

What is funny is that lots of people spend so much time working so hard to get rid of all their stuff but think that enlightenment, i.e. ditching the illusion of the dualistic split, is largely unattainable. I have exactly the opposite view, that ditching the split is very

attainable but getting rid of all of our stuff is completely impossible. When I hear about those who wish to attain a type of Buddhahood that is defined by not having any stuff, I usually think to myself that the countless eons they usually claim are necessary to accomplish this are a gross underestimation. The real world is about stuff, and enlightenment is about the real world.

What is very nice about ditching the split, aside from the fact that it can be done, is that now we can be friends with our stuff naturally, even if it sucks. We can work with it as well as can be expected and from a place of great clarity and understanding. Stage by stage, ditching the split makes all the slow but necessary healing so much easier or at least more tolerable. Thus, take the time to work with your stuff, or try not to, as you like. Our stuff is here and being dealt with anyway. However, seriously consider also doing the practices that can ditch the split, i.e.

those that ask us to see the true nature of the sensations that make up all of our stuff and our attempts to deal with it.

Try these two scenarios on for size and see which seems to fit with your goals for your life, with your vision of a life well lived. In the first, imagine working with your stuff as best you can for most of your life, never really knowing what is just needless mind noise and mental duress caused by a lack of basic clarity. In your old age you do the practices that lead to realization. The benefits of that level of understanding may then be used for yourself and others during the remaining years of your life.

In the second scenario, you take the time early in your spiritual practice to attain to realization, following the precise instructions and recommendations of a well-developed insight tradition. You then use that level of increased clarity, acceptance, intimacy with life and transcendence to work on your stuff and benefit others for the rest of

your life. The second approach seems vastly superior to me, but it is still possible that these things are a matter of taste. One way or the other, take responsibility for the choice you make.

THE “NOTHING TO DO” AND “YOU ARE ALREADY THERE” SCHOOLS

On a somewhat different note, I feel the need to address, which is to say shoot down with every bit of rhetorical force I have, the notion promoted by some teachers and even traditions that there is nothing to do, nothing to accomplish, no goal to obtain, no enlightenment other than the ordinary state of being, no practice or tradition that is of value, no technique that will help. The other side of this same coin is the point of view that you already are realized, already there,

already completely accomplished, and you essentially should be able to just be told this by them to understand it for yourself, which, were it true, would have been very nice of them, except that it is complete bullshit. The Nothing To Do School and the You Are Already There School are both basically vile extremes on the same basic notion that all effort to attain to mastery is already missing the point, an error of craving and grasping. They both contradict the fundamental premise of this book, namely that there is something amazing to attain and understand and that there are specific, reproducible methods that can help you do that.

Here is a detailed analysis of what is wrong with these and related perspectives. Some defenders of these views will claim that they are the most immediate, most complete, highest and most direct teachings that one could promote, but I will claim that they do not lead to much that is good that cannot be attained by conceptual frameworks that are not nearly so problematic or easily misconstrued.

First, these notions encourage people to not practice. The defenders can say what they like, but again and again I see people who subscribe to these sorts of notions resting on their cleverness and grand posteriors and not actually getting it in the same way that my accomplished meditator friends get it. It seems so comforting, this notion that you are already something that you, in fact, are not, or that there is nothing that you could do that would be useful.

The notion that people already are something begs the question: What are they? These views tend to imply that they are already something such as perfect, enlightened, realized, awakened, or 324

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment something even worse such as Awareness, Cosmic Consciousness, The Atman, an aspect of The Divine, etc. all of which cannot actually be found. While Buddhism does sometimes go there, such as using terms such as Dharmakaya and Buddha Nature, these are very slippery, high concepts that were added later and require a ton of explanation and practice experience to keep them from becoming the monsters they nearly always become in less experienced hands.

Awakening involves clearly perceiving universal characteristics of phenomena. While one can attempt to rest comfortably in the

intellectual notion that these universal characteristics are there anyway and be comforted by teachings such as easily misconstrued statements like, “I have gained nothing by complete and un-excelled

enlightenment,” the whole, core, essential, root point of all this is that there is something to be gained by becoming one of the people that can actually directly perceive the true nature of things clearly enough to fundamentally change the way reality is perceived in real-time. The straight truth is that the vast majority of people do not start

out being able to do anything even close to this, and most are lucky to be able to stay with three breaths in sequence before wandering off into their neurotic crap, much less understand anything liberating about those breaths. The notion that everyone already is someone who can perceive reality the way the masters do without effort in real-time is a fantastic falsehood, lie, untruth, and in short, one great load of apathy-creating insanity.

If one goes around asking people without very good insight into these things, i.e. the unenlightened, about basic dharma points, points that are obvious to those who have learned to pay attention well, one does not find that everyone already is a person who is perceiving things at the level that makes the difference the dharma promises. Further, even those of lower levels of enlightenment generally have a hard time saying they really are able to perceive the emptiness, luminosity, selflessness, causality, transience, ephemerality, etc. of reality in real-time at all times without having to really do anything. In short, the notion that this is as easy as just being what you already are is wildly off the mark, as the vast majority of people are woefully underdeveloped on the perceptual front in question.

Thus, all reality testing reveals that the two schools are missing a very fundamental point: while the universal characteristics are always manifesting in all things and at all times, there are those who can perceive this well and those who cannot, and meditative training, conceptual frameworks, techniques, teachers, texts, discussions and the like can all contribute to developing the internal skills and wiring to be able to fully realize what is possible, as thousands of practitioners throughout the ages have noticed. I myself have known before and after, meaning that I know what I was capable of perceiving and

understanding before I underwent meditative training and after, and no amount of being fed the concept that I was already as developed as I could be, was already enlightened, was already there, had nothing to do, nothing to develop, was already as clear as I could be, was already perfectly awake, etc. was going to make the difference that practicing for thousands of hours over many years did.

It would be like saying: you are already a concert pianist, you just have to realize it, or you already are a nuclear physicist, you just have to realize it, or you already speak every language, you just have to realize it.

It would be like saying to a two-year old: you already understand everything you need to know so stop learning new things now, or to a severe paranoid schizophrenic: you already are as sane as anyone and

do not need to take your medicines and should just follow the voices that tell you to kill people, or to a person with heart disease: just keep smoking and eating fried pork skins and you will be healthy, or to an illiterate person with no math skills who keeps having a hard time navigating in the modern world and is constantly ripped off: no need to learn to read and do math, as you are just fine as you are, or saying to a greedy, corrupt, corporate-raiding, white-collar criminal, Fascist, alcoholic wife-beater: hey, Dude, you are a like, beautiful perfect flower of the Now Moment, already enlightened [insert toke here], you are doing and not-doing just fine, like wow, so keep up the good work, Man.

Would you let a blind and partially paralyzed untrained stroke victim perform open-heart surgery on your child based on the notion that they already are an accomplished surgeon but just have to realize it?

Would you follow the dharma teachings of people who feed other

Models of the Stages of Enlightenment people this kind of crap? Those who imagine that everyone somehow in their development already became as clear and perceptive as they could be just by being alive is missing something very profound. Do they imagine that you can just remind people of these things and suddenly all wisdom and clarity will suddenly appear? This is mind-bogglingly naive.

I have gained so much that is good and lost so much that is bad by learning to practice well, learning to concentrate, learning the theory, learning insight practices, going through the organic process of the stages over decades, reading the stories, reading about the lives of the great practitioners, having dharma conversations with dharma friends, debating points, wrestling with difficult concepts and how to apply them to my actual life, teaching, learning, studying, playing with the powers, writing, realizing how things are, and delving deeply into the sensate world that I am astounded that anyone would want to try to reduce something so grand, wonderful, deep, rich, amazing and profound to such a paltry, ridiculous concept as the notion that all that is already in place in everyone regardless of what they have done or not done. All those benefits, skills, abilities, powers, states, stages, experiences, insights, and fundamental perceptual changes simply were not available until I did the work, took the time, participated in the process, and no amount of anyone telling me it was otherwise would have helped or made it so.

I know of no examples where the necessary and sufficient causes for the arising of these benefits did not involve some kind of work. In short, I say to those who persist in promoting the Nothing To Do School and the You Are Already There School: STOP IT! You are

spreading craziness, and this is craziness that many people will not be able to tell is craziness, and that appears to include those who promote these fallacies.

While I usually do not go so far as to tell people that there is something so deeply wrong with what they think and how they communicate it that they should stop it immediately and forever, this particular point is a great example of something I consider abhorrent and worthy of profound revision.

Regardless of any kind intentions, the teachings of these schools take a half-truth that seems so very nice and seductive to us neurotic practitioners who just can barely stand another achievement trip and

have such a hard time with self-acceptance and turn that distortion into sugary poison. There is no need to tie the three useful concepts of 1) no-self, 2) self-acceptance in the ordinary sense, and 3) the notion that the sensations that lead to understanding if clearly perceived over and over again are manifesting right here, right now, to such a perversely twisted yet seemingly benign and similar concepts as the ones they unfortunately promote.

FINAL POINTS

Spirituality that ignores or covers up our inevitable dark or undesirable sides is doomed to be bitten and burned by them. Models of realization that involve high ideals of human perfection have caused so much dejection, despair and misguided effort throughout the ages that I have no qualms about doing my very best to try to smash them to pieces on the sharp rocks of reality. They are not completely useless, and there is some value in keeping the standards to which we aspire high as we will see in the next chapter, but most of the time are taken way too seriously to be helpful at all.

It is clear that those who adhere the most rigidly to the self-perfection models of enlightenment are also very often those who believe enlightenment is the least attainable and feel the most disempowered in their practice and spiritual life. Not surprisingly, those with the highest standards for what realization will entail often have the lowest standards for their own practice and what they hope to actually attain in this lifetime. They are the armchair quarterbacks of the spiritual path. Becoming grandiose about aspiring to a high ideal seems to be a common coping mechanism for dealing with a lack of

confidence and insight. As Christopher Titmuss, one of my best and most honest teachers, often says, “We do not come from a self-perfection lineage.” There are those who do explicitly come from self-perfection lineages. I wish them good luck. They’ll need it.

31.SO WHAT'S "FULL ENLIGHTENMENT"? *

This has been a source of considerable debate, confusion and division in Buddhism, particularly between the three main traditions of the Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen. I am going to jump into the fray, as is my typical style, but realize that it is going to be a messy business. These debates tend to boil down to arahats vs. buddhas, a distinction I hope to make clear shortly. Zen is largely on the side of buddhas, though their intriguing vagueness on the subject can at times make it somewhat uncertain what they mean by "buddha." Most of the time the Zen kids actually seem to mean "arahat" when they say "buddha," though I wouldn't go around saying that if you want to be liked. In my more cynical moments, I think their models end at stream entry. On the other hand, the most mythological descriptions of arahats in the Theravada are often closer to the stylized descriptions of buddhas, so the problem is obviously widespread and goes both ways. All kinds of absurd tensions and divisions have arisen around this one point between the Theravada and the Mahayana when, at least in terms of actual dogma, there is really no conflict. How these ideals relate to non-Buddhist traditions is complex, and I offer the simple notion that these things all converge rather than diverge at this level.

The Theravada clearly acknowledges that an arahat is a stage below buddhahood, and nouveau Tibetans seem particularly gleeful at this.

(To digress again for just a moment, there is an apocryphal and absurd story in circulation that when the teachings on emptiness were first given, a large number of arahats dropped dead of heart attacks. This tends to cause conceited laughter and smiles on the faces of nouveau Tibetan Buddhists, which is about as sick a reaction as I can imagine.

When will this sort of vile and absurd defamation of other valuable traditions end?) The arahat has attained to the complete and utter elimination of the illusions of permanence, satisfactoriness, and duality (separate self), and now perceives reality non-dualistically. They know the joy and clarity of freedom, as well as the fullness of their humanity.

Thus, the notion that an arahat is "self-realized" is an oxymoron perpetuated by regular morons.

So What's "Full Enlightenment"?

Arahatship may correlate with the 6th bhumi or the 8th bhumi in the Tibetan model, depending on the sources of information. There are also reasons to associate it with the 10th bhumi, but I digress. Some

Tibetan Buddhists will tell you that the four paths and the ten bhumis are two divergent tracks of awakening, but this is a load of equine excrement. Ditching the split is ditching the split, and the rest is gravy.

Enlightenment is exactly the same regardless of the tradition one followed to attain it. This is non-negotiable, and those who say otherwise are merely doing so for recruiting purposes or because they don't know any better or both.

However, it is clearly stated by both traditions that arahats may not have completely integrated their understanding into their life and so may not have eliminated all "unskillful" residual habits, although defining "unskillful" here is as problematic as defining "appropriate."

There are many stories in The Vi

naya and in modern times about

arahats behaving in strange ways, and this goes ten times for buddhas in the Mahayana and Vajrayana literature and today.

Regardless of how you define "unskillful," eliminating all "unskillful"

residual habits is sometimes seen as such an undertaking that many schools of Buddhism hold it to be an absurd and impractical ideal.

However, there is some place for such high standards if they are supplemented with a very big dose of reality, patience and a sense of humor.

Buddhas are defined as having mastered all of the concentration states and psychic powers, whereas arahats may or may not have. (It should be noted that even unenlightened beings can master almost all of the psychic powers and all of the concentration states.) Buddhas are defined as having understood the teachings and the truth of things "to the very end," whereas arahats have just fully understood these. The distinction here is lost on me.

Further, both sides also state clearly that there are bodhisattvas that may one day become buddhas. Again, to stick around requires being nothing but empty awareness or dharmakaya (in True Self terms), as this is all that is permanent but not a thing or localized in a specific place, etc. as before. This understanding is clearly present in arahats, bodhisattvas of the 8th bhumi and above, and buddhas. Thus, this 330

So What's "Full Enlightenment"?

whole bodhisattva thing and all the talk of the Buddha manifesting as a bodhisattva is just a skillful True Self or dharmakaya teaching, as before, and not actually in conflict with the Theravada except to those who misunderstand what these teachings are really

talking about.

It is this sort of confusion that starts all sorts of absurd and completely useless conversations about rebirth that take away time from real practice and useful inquiry. All talk of Buddha Nature is actually this same True Self teaching, as before. Balanced and strong understanding of both emptiness and compassion is vital for

understanding the Middle Way and for benefiting others, and this point is found in all the Buddhist traditions of which I am aware.

Remember how, in the beginning of Part II, I stated that the point of all of this is to become a master of the relative and the ultimate? When one becomes an arahat, which could from one point of view be considered becoming a master of the ultimate, then the relative world of phenomena is fully understood to also be the ultimate. This then naturally brings in the ideal of Buddhahood as the next logical standard to aspire to, as suddenly one cannot truly be a master of the ultimate without also being a master of the relative. Go become an arahat and see for yourself what conclusion you draw from your experience.

There is a story of a Thai arahat that took Bodhisattva Vows. In doing so, he pissed off lots of die-hard Theravada fans, and many began to think that he must not have actually been an arahat. Again, this is a fairly sick reaction to a beautiful and noble acknowledgement that we can always learn more about how to make a positive difference in this world.

Remember long ago when I mentioned that the first training was also the last training? We must continue to find skillful ways to live in the world after realizations, just like everyone else. On the other hand, the attainment of arahatship is the final understanding that the whole process is simply happening by itself, so whatever progress occurs towards buddhahood and living well in the world, however defined, is from that point on completely natural and inevitable. On reading the old texts, it becomes very clear that not only do arahats have lots left to learn about living in the ordinary world, but so did the Buddha. He was constantly learning more and more about teaching, dealing with people, 331

and running a big organization. In short, don't imagine that you will ever be saved from having to learn how to live well in the world. It is an endless undertaking.

In the end, it must reluctantly be conceded that final and full enlightenment involves the death of a highly enlightened being, something called "paranirvana" or "nirvana without remainder." I don't mean to be needlessly morbid, but while there is still a body and a mind there is still suffering as our old friend Sid the Buddha defined

it, and thus it is not until a highly enlightened being dies that the whole process is completed. This is not meant in any way to promote the suicide of highly enlightened beings, but simply to acknowledge the implications of being born and to be doctrinally correct.

However, this again falls prey to the interconnectedness vs.

complete transcendence debates just as the arahat vs. Buddha debates do, so from a certain point of view the question of what is full enlightenment cannot be answered without all beings getting enlightened and then dying. This is obviously unlikely to occur any time soon.

However, from another point of view all beings are already enlightened but have yet to realize it, and thus the debate is meaningless. Thus, you now have some understanding of why these ridiculous debates have been around for so long and why I obviously am not going to resolve them here. As with all logical systems that involve false assumptions of duality (which they all do), any argument taken far enough either goes in circles, contradicts itself or both. Put your time into clear practice and not into thinking about these things too much.

32.INTEGRATION*

A friend of mine read through an earlier version of this work and commented that there was very little in this book on integration, the process by which one's life comes to be a natural reflection of one's insights. I replied that I would write something about integration when I knew something about it, which he thought was funny, particularly knowing me. However, over the years I have learned a few things about the endlessly complex, mysterious and yet strangely ordinary topic of integration and about living in the world during and in the wake of insights. There are many sources, such as A Path With Heart and After the Ecstasy, the Laundry, both by Jack Kornfield, that do a much better treatement of the issue than what follows, but hopefully some of these simple points will be of use.

The first point is one that I have made implicitly above, but will make explicit here: Go ahead and get some deep insight to integrate in the first place. I have lots of friends on the spiritual path that seem to be doing work that I associate with integration when they don't yet have any fundamental insight to integrate. This seems to be very strange way to go, if you ask me. They seem to be working on their stuff without the clarity and perspective that comes from realizations into the truth of things. Go get enlightened! Become a stream enterer at the very least and preferably become an arahat. Without these realizations, it is very hard to determine what needs work and what is

just excessive delusion and mind noise created by the illusion of duality that still remains.

Thus, when on retreat or doing formal practice, think carefully about what you want to achieve. Do you want to work on your stuff or work on fundamental insights? Realize that it might not be easy to do either, and so might be very hard to do both simultaneously. Do you want to gain deep insights and then work on your stuff from that foundation of basic clarity, or do you want to work on your stuff until, until, until when? Until you don't have any stuff? Good luck!

That brings me to the second point, which is to pick your battles.

We can't do everything. We can't have it all. We simply don't have the time or the energy. Spiritual technology will not change these simple facts of life. We can only be working on so many things at once and still

Integration

do any of them well. We need breaks, downtime, and balance.

However, if we are wise and discerning, we can craft a set of priorities for ourselves that honors our unique spiritual needs, relationship needs, career needs, recreational needs, and family needs, as well as the needs of others. We can do this in a way that is realistic and allows us to keep making good use of our life without burning out or stagnating. No one can ever tell you exactly how to do this. You have your own needs and life situation. Work with it as best you can.

The third point about integration and living in the world that I have had to learn the hard way is a concept that I recently heard articulated very well by my friend Tom in the phrase, "Right plane, right time,"

which was his way of saying, "Use the correct conceptual and paradigmatic framework for the correct situation." Like the simple lists of Part I, this phrase could be the basis of an entire book (see the difficult but excellent The Spectrum of Consciousness, by Ken Wilber, which spends a lot of time explaining how to keep our paradigms straight and not mix them up). From the point of view of integration, it basically means that one generally should use a way of approaching a situation or problem that fits with that situation or problem. One should be conscious of the conceptual frameworks that one uses when approaching each aspect of one's life, as some conceptual frameworks or ways of being may not be helpful or appropriate for certain situations.

I will illustrate this by way of some examples.

When doing insight practices, is it useful to assume a few things.

One should assume that no such thing as a body exists, nor does a mind exist, nor are there natural boundaries inherent in sensations. There are sensations that arise and pass quickly, are not able to satisfy

due to the illusion of duality, and are “empty,” meaning that they imply no self or separateness that is in control. It is not all that useful to get overly concerned with what these sensations actually are or why they arose.

When doing just about everything else, this way of proceeding may cause gigantic problems. For instance, when driving a car, one must assume that one’s car is a separate entity, one that should not collide with the other cars on the road. One must assume solidity and that one is in control of one’s car, one must pay attention to the edges of specific things, and be careful about the details of one’s driving environment, 334

Integration

one’s destination, and the rules of the road. For “real world” problems, I have found that “real world” solutions are the way to go. Right plane, right time. It must also be said that paying more attention to our sensate world helps both with insight practices and the “daily life.”

Another example to contrast with the paradigm useful in insight practices is in human relationships. Imagine someone saying to you,

“You are so empty. You are so unsatisfactory. You are so transient.” It just doesn’t work. Imagine going into a bank at which you have recently overdrawn your account and saying, “I do not exist as a separate entity.

There is no ‘I’ or ‘mine’ that can be found. Thus, all of this talk of me owing you something is nonsense. We are interdependent luminosity.”

This just doesn’t fly. Right plane, right time. These are ridiculous examples, but if you hang out in spiritual scenes and pay attention to the conceptual frameworks people use and when they use them, you will find numerous similar errors in judgment.

These examples also illustrate the important concept of being careful when talking about one’s practice. Chose the correct words or degree of silence for the people around you and the situations in which you find yourself, particularly soon after dramatic occurrences. I can’t tell you the number of times I have looked like a completely inconsiderate nutcase when I opened my big flapping pie-hole to the wrong people soon after some intense insight or rapture had occurred.

As a dead French occultist once said, “To tell someone something they can’t understand is as bad as telling them a lie.” Wise words. Cultivate a network of friends with whom you can share these things, or keep a diary if this is not practical, or both. There is something helpful about being able to talk about unusual things in a safe and appropriate context.

It is not uncommon for people who get deeply into practice to

encounter two issues: that it is difficult to learn to go easily between one way of being and another, from one conceptual framework and another, and that practice and "the world" seem to be in direct conflict. Given our basic dualistic illusion, it often seems that we must let things go in some sort of literal sense, such as quitting a job, in order to "let it go" in the insight sense, to see the true nature of the sensations that make up the process. This is obviously not true, but such erroneous logic can be very tempting.

335

Integration

As to the rest of integration, well, if we have insights to integrate, it just seems to happen. That's about the best I can do. Life happens as before, and so it goes. We grow, we learn, we get sick and we die. To quote a song from a Bogart movie, "The fundamental things apply as time goes by." Go and read some extensive book on the subject and tell me whether or not it basically said the same thing while using a whole lot more words to do so. Still, such books can be helpful.

336

Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha

33.IT IS POSSIBLE!

So why am I mentioning all of these states and stages that are thought by many to be largely mythical and unattainable? Because they are absolutely otherwise, that's why. People do attain these states today, though they tend to only talk about them to their teachers and to close friends who have enough experience in this stuff to understand and not have odd reactions to these disclosures. I assure you that I wouldn't have bothered writing all of this if I didn't think that it was possible for those reading this book to master this stuff.

A friend of mine was on a retreat in Burma and had attained to second path as confirmed by U Pandita. He was finally done with his retreat and was taken to the airport by one of the people who helped to run the monastery, who incidentally was a stream enterer. As my friend was leaving, he yelled to him across the terminal, "Come back for number three!" meaning, "Come back and attain third path!" Note the many ways in which what underlies this statement differs from the paradigm you would likely find in your basic Western Buddhist.

First, most Western Buddhists don't really believe that after a few months of good practice you could get enlightened or more

enlightened. They do not believe it is simply a matter of following simple instructions, moving through the clearly defined insights and tagging a path. In fact, I often tell this story to Western Buddhists, many of whom have been on numerous insight retreats lead by teachers trained by the best Burmese masters, and they say things like, "What do you mean, 'third path'?" It makes me want to scream when

they don't even know the basic dogma of enlightenment, much less anything practical about it. Most Western teachers wouldn't have the guts to stand up and say, "Yeah, he did it, he got second path" (assuming they would even been in a position to evaluate such a person's practice).

Even if they did, it would likely be a huge, taboo secret. Here's my point: it can be done, it is done, it can be done, and there are people who can help you do it!

Practice, practice, practice! This is the big difference between those who are merely into giving lip service to Buddhism and those who really get what the old boy was talking about. Go on retreats and actually

It is Possible!

follow the instructions to the letter all day long. Find people who know how it is done and hang out with them. Keep it simple. Avoid magical thinking and abandoning common sense.

The simple fact that you have read this book means that the ball is now in your court. There is more than enough information presented here on straightforward techniques that have a great track record of performing as advertised. As a large and wise chef in a gourmet seafood restaurant once said to me, "I have two words for you: perseverance furthers."

34.MORE ON THE "MUSHROOM FACTOR"*

One of the reasons that more people who make progress do not talk about progress could be the fact that, as practice deepens, the exaggerated importance to the meditator of thoughts of "my

attainment," "I am enlightened," etc. gradually falls away and assumes its proper proportion, its proper place in things. However, this does not mean that such language cannot be used. While there may routinely be no good reasons to talk about attainments, or even good reasons not to, there is a long and glorious tradition of compassionate meditation masters and enlightened beings who braved the consequences and told the world that it could be done, that they had done it, and they were going to tell all of those who hadn't how they could do it too. The results of this varied from founding major religions to being executed or both, but such are the caprices of reality.

It is interesting that Buddhism started out very much as a tradition in which those who were highly attained were often loudly proclaimed to be so by themselves and others with the specific details of their skills and understandings made clear. The motivation for this was that such individuals were valuable resources for others and this

should be known for the benefit of all. This widespread cultural phenomenon of meditation masters being “out” is abundantly clear in the ancient texts, and occurs to varying degrees in Asian countries today.

In the West, the situation is often remarkably different from this early practice. There seem to be two basic styles of code used when advertising dharma teachers. The first is to simply use a grand title such as, “Wazoo Tulku, Supreme and Luminous Dharma King.” The

second type of code is in the style of a resume for a job, “Jane Rainbow is the author of three books. She has been teaching meditation for 17

years internationally and is a member of the Buddhist Flower Society.”

Notice that neither of these bios tells you anything about:

•

what they may actually know

•

which traditions they draw from

•

their attitude towards scholarship and the standard dogmas

•

which techniques they are masters of or teach

•

what they have attained or claim to have attained

More on the “Mushroom Factor”

•

what their personality is like

•

what their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher and person are

•

who trained them

•

the lineage or lineages by which they are claimed

•

their level of availability to their students (though “teaches internationally” is often an ominous clue)

•

why it is that they teach

•

what they expect from their students, particularly as regards money, vows and exclusive loyalty

•

how many students they already have

•

whether or not they will talk about real practice directly

•

if you run into trouble with them, is there a governing organization that can address this

What is astounding is how few students will ever ask their teachers about any of these specific practical issues. These are the questions that should be initially considered when seeking a teacher, and yet you almost never see them addressed on a retreat center brochure. Imagine a university where none of the professors would tell you about their research, who funds their work, where they got their degree, what courses they teach, who taught them, what their specialty is, or even why they like being professors. That would be just a bit strange, wouldn't it?

This sort of information is typically available for public consumption on the university web page.

There is something very balanced and reasonable about this. When I see a presentation at the school I currently attend, someone generally tells you exactly who the person is, what they are working on, highlights of what they have published in the past, and what positions and degrees they currently hold, and why they are qualified to speak on the topic of the day. Perhaps I am particularly naïve and idealistic, but I imagine a spiritual world where this would be standard practice as well. I dream that this would simultaneously cut down on otherworldly spiritual ideals, provide faith that it can be done, demystify the process of awakening, and bring the whole thing back down to earth. There is obviously a long way to go before such a dream is likely to be a reality, but hopefully this little book will be one small step towards that. There are cool things our 340

More on the "Mushroom Factor"

minds can do and perceive, and there are definable techniques that lead to those cool things. Why does is have to be more complex than that?

In my more cynical moments, I have sometimes thought that

Western teacher bios could just as easily read, "Jane is a Sagittarius from California. Her favorite color is turquoise and she is a mediocre chef,"

or "Wazoo is old and of substantial girth. His favorite movie is 'Animal House.'" These would give you about as much practical information as most teacher bios do in the West.

Obviously, the assumption is that if they have been practicing for so many years, have a fancy name, or if someone let them publish a book or teach internationally, then they must be in some generic way a good teacher of something. There may also be the unspoken assumption that there is some unnamed but reliable body of

evaluators of teachers somewhere that have checked the person out. Either of these may or may not be true, and some traditions do a much better job of being clear and honest about these things than others do.

Some other reasons that more people don't talk about mastery when it actually happens or clearly advertise themselves are that they don't want to make others jealous or intimidated. Also, talking about the stages of insight practice can sound quite outrageous and bizarre.

Further, with clarity comes mystery, and sometimes it can seem inappropriate to talk about something that can sometimes seem so slippery and sometimes even uncertain. The late, great Achaan Chah once stated that even arahats could sometimes be unsure about whether or not they are arahats. (Others, including one of my favorite teachers, have said that all arahats are always sure they are arahats. This second view is a bit extreme, and is a limited possible thought model. You know what I think of those!)

Thus, a major reason for secrecy or codes seems to be self-

preservation, though not in the sense of "ego" preservation. These are kind motives, but they also perpetuate the atmosphere of secrecy and confusion so present in the modern mystical world. The unfortunate truth is that talking about attainments tends to cause many more unhelpful reactions than helpful ones. It tends to isolate the person who has attained these things, cause people to think of them as way too wonderful or completely nuts (or both) and generally project all sorts of 341

More on the "Mushroom Factor"

naïve and unhelpful things onto them, such as a limited emotional range model or even worse a limited possible action model. This can create situations that foster the abuse of sex, money, drugs, and power that seem to plague gurus and other spiritual teachers with some regularity.

Freud would have had a field day with this.

As regards the bizarre and fantastic projections that are commonly associated with teachers, gurus, and all other potentially enlightened beings, they tend to arise because there is not enough widespread information on how misleading the limited emotional range models are and what preposterous junk the limited possible action models are, not to mention the lack of information on the absurdity of the wide range of other magical attributes that are imagined to arise from simply ceasing to identify with ordinary phenomena. I considered writing a whole chapter called "Adults in Fantasyland," but hopefully the preceding sentence will do the trick.

This lack of information on the ordinariness of realized individuals creates a viscous cycle in which those who know don't say,

“I am enlightened and ordinary,” because if they do then they will be viewed in very strange ways despite what they say; and, because they don’t tell, no one but them knows. Thus, the strong potential for nonsensical projections and reactions remains. While sometimes the masses are fed manure and kept in the dark, if they are fed nothing at all then they will often invent manure to feed themselves. No one is happy to learn that perfection in some ordinary sense is impossible, and some will continue to seek the perfect guru, community or even self for years despite the fact that such things do not exist.

I have few qualms about blaming those who currently do know for not doing more to debunk these myths and for not being willing to speak out loudly against the large amount of nonsensical, magical thinking that is out there, though I can just as easily understand why they may not be in any mood to take the heat. As things currently stand, all the attention and confusion that can come from revealing one’s wisdom and understanding can often not seem to be worth it, despite how much one may want to help others. This can be particularly true if one does not want to be a guru or member of the Dharma Jet Set but just wants to 342

More on the “Mushroom Factor”

help people learn this stuff without becoming some kind of odd object of obsessive adoration or criticism.

It seems that you can only help those with very clear, strong, and noble motivations who are willing to actually listen and also be intelligent and realistic about their relationship to you as a fellow human being and with whom your personality seems to fit fairly well. Further, you can only help those who will actually practice, engage and inquire.

This turns out to be a very small group most of the time. You could also say that you can only teach those who didn’t really need you to teach them in the first place, as they were going to do it anyway.

It is possible, though not necessarily advisable, to drop all kinds of really glaring and even tacky hints that one has attained to mastery of some aspect of the amazing states and stages of the spiritual path and yet have no one show even the slightest sign that they have picked up on them. Even more bizarre is how few people, having been directly and unambiguously told that they are around someone who has attained to some deep level of mastery of this stuff by standard methods, will actually ask reasonable questions about how they could do the same.

Even more surprising is how few of those who do ask good questions will then use this practical information wisely. As Bill Hamilton put it, “I have a treasure of infinite value that nobody

wants." He was only barely exaggerating, even as regards many of those who consider themselves

"meditators" and "Buddhists."

Thus, out of practical self-preservation and a reluctant respect for the fact that most people seem not to want to hear about actual mastery of this stuff, the majority of those who do master concentration and/or insight practices tend to not talk about it, or only to a very few (see Saints and Psychopaths, by Bill Hamilton, for an interesting discussion of some of these issues, particularly the etiquette of enlightenment). All this contributes to the "Mushroom Factor."

Lastly, there seems to be a somewhat odd lack of support for up-and-coming potential teachers. One of my friends has commented that it can be much easier to get enlightened than to get "lineaged," i.e.

officially acknowledged that you are a qualified teacher and a reasonable enough person to be allowed to teach, have students referred to you, be a part of the monitoring process that keeps teachers on the up and up, 343

More on the "Mushroom Factor"

and that sort of thing. Two of my very best, most dedicated and accessible teachers were not officially sanctioned, despite their high attainments, great teaching ability and extensive knowledge of spiritual practice. Also, there often seems to be little clear articulation of roles that occupy the middle ground, little well developed sense of apprenticeship, little sense of intermediate territory between fully lineaged teacher and student. The degree of these issues varies by tradition.

It is true that there are some good reasons why the senior teaching establishments are slow or reluctant to allow new teachers into the carefully guarded inner circles. There are certain individuals who possess the mastery needed to be a teacher but are not good choices for other reasons, with mental pathology and odd personality traits being chief among them. There are those whose political skills have been such that they have managed to get sanctioned despite the fact that they were not qualified to teach at the level they claimed they could, with predictable associated problems following suit.

However, current senior teachers, many of which are the first generation of Westerners to be so, do not yet seem to be quite as comfortable giving sanction to new teachers as their Asian teachers tended to be giving sanction to them. Perhaps this will correct itself given time, as there is a lot of unused talent out there and a lot of unmet demand for authentic teachers. On the other hand, making a living as a teacher can be hard, and who needs more competition for scarce donations or seats on the front platform at overbooked

meditation centers?

It is also true that numerous meditation traditions that have come to the West have many people teaching in them without the foggiest idea that they are not at all qualified to do so. The old texts state that one should have at least crossed the A&P Event to teach, though in the tradition I come from they consider second path as the standard minimum requirement for any sort of teaching. Basically, chancing into a path is impressive, but being able to tag another one demonstrates reproducible competence. I again blame the Mushroom Factor for this, as I suspect that if people knew what reasonable standards are for teachers and that there are actually those who meet these, many would 344

More on the "Mushroom Factor"

then realize that they simply shouldn't be teaching and bow out gracefully.

Beyond this, there are also good reasons to question the very concepts of "teacher" and "student" and the disturbing and often unquestioned rigidity with which they are sometimes applied. One person may have an understanding that they share with someone else and then turn around and ask them a question about something that the person who was a "student" just moments before is skilled in. I have come to the conclusion that some of the best teaching happens in conversations between friends and not in the context of very short, formal interviews with lineaged teachers who have just flown in for the week.

The climate of secrecy surrounding conversations about mastery of these things, restrictive lineage issues and the rarity of engaging in long, deep conversations with harried and over committed Jet Set Dharma Teachers combine to create what I term the "Dharma Underground."

This refers to loose associations of those who are "in the know" but not officially sanctioned who cautiously seek one another out, support one another, and exchange ideas about how to go deeper in ways that have everything to do with friendship and empowerment and little to do with formal lineages or rigid concepts of "teacher" and "student."

Often such conversations occur in "silent" retreat centers or in other ways that involve breaking some of the rules that may be helpful from one perspective but also defend the semi-arbitrary privileges of the lineaged elite while disempowering and marginalizing others with valuable and accurate knowledge and experience to share. Interestingly, when reading the old texts I often get the feeling that a significantly more egalitarian, balanced, and friendly style was much more the model that occurred in the early

Buddhist community, and I often long for its return.

It is interesting that, unlike Tantric traditions and many others, the Theravada does not have any formal vows of secrecy regarding the details of mastery of its practices. Perhaps they would just be needless overkill.

35.SO WHO THE HECK IS DANIEL M. INGRAM?

I suppose that if I am going to rant about how most dharma teachers do not do a good job of clearly stating what they know, what they teach, etc. then I should try to avoid being a complete hypocrite and thus answer some of those questions here.

Here's my Western Teacher Bio the way I would have it on a

retreat center brochure: "Daniel is a Double Aquarian from North Carolina who prefers to be called 'Dharma Dan,' 'dude' or simply

'Honored Archmystic, Sir.' His favorite movie is 'Raising Arizona.'" Just kidding!

Let's try that again: "Daniel is an extroverted Gen X intellectual. He is known for his pronounced enthusiasm, lip-flapping, grandiosity, eccentricity, and calling people on their stuff and shadow sides regardless of whether or not this is helpful or even accurate. He is an arahat and has a solid mastery of the basic concentration states from the first jhana to Nirodha Samapatti, including the Pure Land Jhanas. He also has a solid knowledge of Buddhist theory and the texts, and because of these three areas of expertise considers himself a qualified teacher. He was also authorized and encouraged to teach by a lineaged abbot of the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. When it comes to insight practices, he has standards so high, exacting, and uncompromising that only those who are dedicated practitioners are likely to find them helpful. On the other hand, he is a firm believer that if people simply practice the basic techniques recommended by the Buddha they can be very successful and awakened meditators. He is one of the rare teachers who will talk about insight directly and answer nearly any question about dharma practice without using code, covering things up or watering things down. Daniel is a diehard Mahasi Sayadaw fan, though he is very happy whenever he sees people trying to master any of the world's great mystical traditions and thus considers himself a pan-mystical evangelist.

He is also a chronic map-monger and technique freak because he has had them work very well for him. He does not claim to have any special knowledge of how to live skillfully in the conventional world, but has found that a positive attitude, non-pretentious kindness, and a sense of humor will take you a long way. If you imagine that you want to bust out

some hardcore practice but are in fact just looking for a daddy, shrink, social worker, or someone to help you prop up your self-esteem, Daniel is unlikely at this stage in his development to be the best person to help you meet your needs. He considers himself to be one badass Dharma Cowboy and prefers similar company or at least those who aspire to be so."

I dare, no, I double dare any other teacher to be that honest when writing their next bio, not that they are likely to be given enough space to disclose anything resembling this much honest and practical information. A few more things: I crossed the Arising and Passing Away when I was about 15 and did it again about 4 more times by my recollection over the next 10 years without formal practice, technique or guidance. I attained to stream entry at the end of the first week of my fourth retreat on January 13th, 1996 in Bodh Gaya, India, in the Thai Monastery. I also crossed the Arising and Passing Away of second path on that retreat. I attained second path in daily life while working at the National AIDS Hotline with the CDC in July, 1996. I was in the break room just hanging out. I attained to Third Path towards the end of 1996, also in daily life, after a retreat a few weeks before where I crossed the Arising and Passing Away of that cycle. I attained to Nirodha Samapatti (see the appendix) one month later, but it would take me a more few years to really nail down hard samatha jhanas and the formless realms so that I could access them off retreat.

I was an anagami for almost 7 years, going through cycle after cycle of progressive appreciation of the emptiness of ordinary phenomena, with my total count of what felt like full new paths being about 27. I wrote most of this book during that time. I also earned a two-year Masters of Science in Public Health in Infectious Disease Epidemiology at UNC Chapel Hill and then went on to complete medical school there.

Then, on April 17th, 2003, on a 21-day retreat at the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Center between medical school and my residency, I attained to arahatship. It happened while I was doing walking meditation on that glorious Spring morning. I was sick of the cycles of insight and profoundly inspired by the steady and gentle invitation of the teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, Junior, to simply see through the whole 347

thing as he had done. His calm smile seemed say, "You can do it. Come on! Any day now." Always sit with arahats if you possibly can. That's my advice, anyway.

I decided that I would allow no sensation anywhere in the entire wide sense field to go by without it being clearly known as it was

during every single second of the day. It was a high standard, but strangely enough can actually be very closely approximated. It was sufficient to do the trick after about a week of doing that some 20+ hours per day. I remember attaining to a Fruition, and a few seconds later I noticed something about the entrance to it and the re-forming of the sense of a perceiver on the back side of it, and then suddenly the knot of perception flipped open, everything was the same and yet the perspective on it was completely different, and my vipassana problem, once I had stabilized in that understanding, was solved.

I had barely taught in the previous 6 years as my own practice has consumed most of the scant free time I had, but a few days after seeing it I told my teacher I was thinking of teaching again. He shot me an uncharacteristically sharp glance and said in a forceful and commanding voice, “Good!”

I have learned all sorts of useful and interesting things since then, but seeing through the center point was the essential thing. Many, many thanks to everyone and everything that made all of this possible, from the people who taught the Buddha to those who carry his knowledge forward today, from the people who cooked in the meditation centers I stayed in to the usurious credit card companies that loaned me the money to keep going on retreats, and for everything else in this wide world that made it happen: Thank you, thank you, thank you! □

In addition to my successes, I felt very comfortable writing about the many ways that one can screw up on the spiritual path, either because I had done so myself, because one or more of my respected dharma companions had done so or, most often, for both reasons. I can’t tell you how many stupid things I thought, said and did along the way while in desperate pursuit of something that was right there all along, and I continue to make countless errors when trying to spread the dharma and live my life. The only state, stage or attainment I write about from theory rather than experience is Buddhahood.

There are a few practical uses for such information. It is potentially useful to disclose that I have made countless errors on the spiritual path so that this may counter the notion that I am coming from some useless

“holier than thou” position and also to try to counter in others the sense that they are the only ones who make numerous errors on the spiritual path. I hope it was not necessary. As someone wise once said, “The life of a Zen Master is one continuous mistake,” and that goes equally for the rest of us.

I feel that the most important positive result that can come from stating, “I know that of which I write,” is the chance that this might create the sense that extraordinary things may be understood and attained by otherwise ordinary people such as and including myself and yourself. I’ve done this stuff while holding down jobs, having relationships, and pursuing graduate studies. I did it on a few weeks or months of retreat time here and there with a lot of daily practice. My total retreat time from beginning to arahatship was about 8 months with the longest sit being 27 days. The point that I am trying to make is that these techniques and practices are powerful and effective for those who take the time to follow them. If I can convey the sense that this is true by going on and on about what “I” have accomplished, then doing so serves a useful function.

Another possible positive outcome is the sense that might be created in some people that this is not a dead and theory-based tradition that simply rehashed the semi-mythical glory of long dead gurus and ancient writings, but a living tradition with validity in our modern times. The last useful point that might come from someone who has quite obviously achieved nothing even close to self-perfection saying, “I have strong mastery of the core teachings of the Buddha,” is that it might serve to help bring the whole notion of spirituality back down to earth. I am quite willing to look ridiculous and grandiose if there is some chance of it furthering that process, though I realize that it could easily backfire.

Consider carefully the differences and similarities between confidence, arrogance, and empowering others to realize that they can do it also.

The word to the wise is: don’t believe me or anyone else! Take the time to verify these things for yourself from your own direct experience.

I could easily be fooling myself, you or both of us on numerous points 349

So Who The Heck Is Daniel M. Ingram?

and for all sorts of reasons from innocent to evil. There certainly is a well-developed and ancient tradition of doing so. However, “my”

attainments shouldn’t matter so much to you, as the only person’s understanding that will really help you is your own.

My personal experiences with the “psychic powers” are not yet as fully developed as the more fundamental areas, but I have enough experience to be able to help all but the most advanced practitioner of them. As to scholarship, I feel that reading widely and really considering the meaning of what one reads and how it might actually be applied is a very good idea, and have myself read around 150 dharma books, both traditional and modern. While I have been

authorized and encouraged to teach by a formal lineage, this is a mere formality and not a sure sign in anyone of real understanding or attainment, much less teaching ability. Luckily, realizations are not dependent on conditions such as formal acceptance into a lineage. I have chosen a lucrative career path that has little to do with meditation, and this eliminates my financial dependence on the dharma and the temptation to water things down for mass consumption or popular appeal, as is so commonly done.

I have found that if I repeatedly ask those who start talking with me about dharma practice the questions, “What do you really want and why?” and, “What would you be willing to do to get that?” I usually come to the conclusion that they are not really interested in the things I am interested in (i.e. the things mentioned in this book), and thus I can turn the conversation to other topics and avoid wasting our time. Those few who do share some of my interests are my dear companions in what I call The Dharma Underground, and for them I am extremely grateful.

But enough about me, let me tell you about my book! I think that I have made my influences and “humble” opinions on a wide variety of other subjects very clear throughout this work. To be truthful, sometimes I have picked up this book and thought, “Goodness

gracious, what a harsh rant. What a heap of reductionist dogma, false certainty, pretentiousness and my own neurotic stuff. I pity the poor, innocent, and pathologically nice, mainstream, ritualistic, disempowered Buddhists unfortunate enough to have picked this thing up and simply been kicked in their soft and flabby posteriors by it to little good effect.”

On other days I have picked it up and thought, “Wow, this really is the book that I wished I had read all those years ago when I decided to really go for it. It would have been so extremely helpful to have had so many details about high-level practice laid out this clearly, so many myths dispelled, so much honesty about what the path is and isn’t.

What a joy it is that there are books that convey such an enthusiastic and empowering view on these practices. Maybe there will be a few people out there who just needed a little prodding to realize their full potential as great and powerful meditators. Wouldn’t it be great if I can find a way to get this book into their hands.” I hope that you had something like both reactions, as I think that both points of view have some validity.

Two interesting and practical questions for you are, “Who are you in direct experiential terms?” and “Who is it that knows?” Answer

these, and you will come to know all of this directly for yourself. The first and last job of anyone who teaches meditation should be to make herself or himself redundant. This book is the best I have been able come up with to help accomplish this, as I have tried my best to pack it with everything useful that I know.

36.CONCLUSION AND BEST WISHES

I do hope that people will not settle for becoming lost in the dogma of this work, Buddhism, or of any mystical tradition. I hope that they learn to actually do the practices that lead to freedom and to the deep integration of that freedom into their lives. I hope that they have faith that mastery can be attained. I hope that they will learn to ask good questions that will help them to accomplish this. I hope that the culture of Buddhism and the world in general will become less sectarian instead of more. I hope that students of meditation will use spiritual conceptual frameworks as tools and not worship them as sacred dogma. I hope that the huge amount of magical and fantastic thinking that accompanies spiritual traditions will immediately vanish from this planet forever.

I hope that those on the path will learn to talk with each other in ways that are conducive to clear practice. I hope that any controversial points made in this little book will promote skillful debate and real inquiry rather than contraction into fear and dogma. I hope that people will work towards actual mastery of the path so that they will no longer need writings such as this one. I hope that people will not spend their lives lost in content but will also delve deeply into the liberating truth of the Three Characteristics. I hope that the level of expectation about what is possible will be raised in a way that is helpful, and that any jealousy or frustration that results from this will be skillfully channeled into precise practice and the joy that it can be done.

May all of this be for the benefit of all beings. Should you realize that you wish to awaken, know that it is within your capabilities and do so.

APPENDIX: THE CESSATION OF PERCEPTION AND FEELING (*NIRODHA SAMAPATTI*)

The cessation of perception and feeling, Nirodha samapatti in Pali, is the highest of the temporary attainments. As is traditional in the commentaries, I have included it last. It is discussed in a number of places, including Sutta #44, The Shorter Series of Questions and Answers, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, in a talk given by a female arahat named “Dhammadinna,” and Path to Deliverance

by Nyanatiloka, which draws from that fine text. This attainment can neither be said to be a state or not a state, nor can it be said to be purely a concentration attainment or an insight attainment, as it lacks a basis for analysis, meaning that as there is no experience that can be analyzed.

The word “Nirodha” (meaning “Cessation”) is also sometimes used without the qualifier “samapatti” to refer to Fruition, so be careful to keep your terms straight when reading the old texts or speaking with others about these things. I always mean the cessation of perception and feeling when I use the word “Nirodha,” but others may not.

It is said that Nirodha can only be attained by anagamis and arahats (those of 3rd and 4th path) who have some mastery of the formless realms. However, as Bill Hamilton once said, if you are an anagami or arahat, you are bound to run into Nirodha Samapatti eventually. There are some reasons to question whether or not those of the lower stages of awakening might be able to attain this, or how the ability to attain this relates to the number of stages of awakening. However, this is not a subject that I am in a mood to pursue in detail, as I have learned the hard way that such questions do not help in the end. If you manage to attain Nirodha, I wouldn’t fixate on the idea that you have attained at least 3rd path. That said, with a few months of careful work and focused intent, I was able to attain it after completing my third cycle of insight.

One attains Nirodha by fusing insight practices and concentration practices in a fairly gentle way that is much less focused and precise than one would do if one wanted to attain Fruition. I find it easiest to attain when reclining, but the first time I attained it I was sitting. There is nothing that can really be said about this attainment, except for mentioning things about the entrance, exit, and the consequences of the attainment. One rises through the samatha jhanas in a very low-key fashion with some weak awareness of their true nature (the Three Characteristics), enters the eighth jhana (neither perception nor yet non-perception), and then emerges from that state. Sometime shortly thereafter, and without warning or very recent premeditation, one may suddenly enter the cessation of perception and feeling. It must be noted that previous interest in attaining this during the preceding days or weeks tends to increase the chances of this attainment showing up. As one gets better at attaining this, one can slip in the inclination (resolution) to attain it after emerging from the 8th jhana and then forget about it before dropping in.

As my dear old meditation friend Kenneth so rightly points out, between the 8th jhana and Nirodha there are a number of states very worth mentioning, thought the standard texts strangely don’t for

reasons I can't fathom. We have come to call them Pure Land One and Pure Land Two, as this seemed as good a thing to call them as anything, thus making a total of 10 jhanas and Nirodha. Both have as their

overwhelming quality the feeling of deep gratitude in the purest and most profound sense, with Pure Land Two being a deepening and strengthening of Pure Land One, though it is also a bit wider and more diffuse. These are remarkably healing, complete, pervasive, satisfying and heartfelt states, and the word "pure" applies quite nicely. Early on I barely noticed them and would jump as fast as I could from the 8th jhana to Nirodha. Now I know better and take the time to enjoy them. They write gratitude, beauty, clarity, and contentment onto the mind.

There is also a state somewhere in that territory that seems basically like pure presence, like being a super-pervading Watcher, with the quality of perceiving or awareness itself being the dominant quality. This has a very different quality from the 6th jhana Boundless Consciousness, and in my opinion is far superior, more fundamental, and could be argued as the highest of the states that involve experience. However, the fact that states that are so clear to me continue to show up that were never described in the old texts so far as I can tell brings up another important point: the territory out there past the fourth jhana and particularly the eighth jhana is very malleable. Kenneth and I have 354

speculated that the limits to the states attainable out there are limited by our imagination and concentration skill only, and I have imagined staging a friendly contest among high-level practitioners to dream up states that are even better than the ones I know so that we can play around with attaining them and seeing if there are any limits to the thing.

The large list of all the exotic heaven realms found in the old texts adds credence to this belief. I realize this may seem like a contradiction to earlier statements I have made about being able to master concentration practices absolutely. It is. Back to describing Nirodha…

The texts rightly say that, on the entrance to Nirodha, verbal formations cease first, then bodily sensations, then the whole of mental functioning ceases when the attainment is finally entered. This is traditionally explained as correlating to the first jhana, fourth jhana and then the entrance into Nirodha respectively. However, it may be noticed that in the three moments before cessation of perception sets in (during the complete power failure-like entrance) the verbal formations, bodily formations and mental formations cease in that order also in three consecutive and definable moments, with the whole thing taking about 1/3 of a second. Thus, the texts may have a

double meaning, or were misinterpreted by scholars who had not ever attained Nirodha Samapatti. I say this because it is still typical for many bodily and verbal formations to arise between the eighth jhana the entrance to Nirodha, and thus the traditional interpretation does not hold up.

The texts also say that this attainment may last seven days or even longer, but I don't personally know of anyone who has admitted to having this happen. That doesn't mean it can't happen, but would probably require a long and sustained retreat before hand. The duration of such attainments will be related directly to one's concentration abilities, and these are very dependent upon local practice conditions and the amount that they have recently been exercised.

Unlike Fruition, one exits this attainment in the reverse of the way one came in, with mental formations arising first, quickly followed by physical and then verbal formations in the characteristic analogue way of the entrance and with the same timing. After leaving this attainment, the mind tends to be deeply peaceful and very clear, and one's body tends to be very relaxed. The longer the attainment lasted, the stronger and 355

more durable this effect will be. Thus, I would not recommend attaining this immediately before entering into situations that require high-speed decisions or actions. The texts say that one inclines to solitude or quiet after attaining this state, and in general I agree.

I mention this attainment because it is one more of those things that is found today but has often been relegated to the realm of myth and legend or has been forgotten entirely. It is not that Nirodha is necessary, but it definitely is a good and useful thing to be able to attain. In fact, I have not yet spoken with anyone who had attained it who didn't consider it among the absolute King Daddy of meditation attainments other than arahatship, as the depth of its afterglow never fails to impress and amaze. Hopefully, mentioning it will raise the standard to which people feel they can reasonably aspire, which is basically the whole goal of this book.

One more little morsel for you brave adventurers… I have noticed that the easiest time to attain Nirodha is usually a few weeks after attaining a path, when the vipassana jhana aspect of the progress of insight is becoming clear and a nice degree of mastery has been attained in that Review phase. However, it has this nice/nasty habit of helping to precipitate a new progress cycle, as the level of clarity gained in its wake is impressive. Thus, one may go from the best highs of a Review phase and Nirodha's glorious afterglow to the 3rd ñana, A&P and the Dark Night quickly. In fact, this seems to be a very natural part of many cycles of anagamis who also know the samatha

jhanas and formless realms.

Best of luck and practice well,

Daniel

356

Index

INDEX

1.A&P Event.....238

of the unfinished operation.....201

as minimum attainment for teaching

the boulder and the hill.....69

.....344

anaolgy.....

difficulty obtaining Fruition after.....255

of Agean Stables.....126

mimicking enlightenment.....248

angels.....

sorting out from Fruition.....240

visions of.....145

A&P/A&P Event.....179

anger.....120

abandonment.....

compassion in.....121

of altered states.....12

arahat.....219, 329, 353

of morality.....12

arahat.....

absorption.....133

and ego.....276

acceptance.....

below buddhahood.....329

exploration with.....21

master of ultimate.....331

access concentration.....9, 139

revised model.....282

foundation of insight practices.....171

taking bochisattva vows.....331

near enemy of first jhana.....141

traditional definition.....274

Achaan Chah.....

two types.....283

on arahats.....341

Wisdom Eye.....282

advanced practitioner.....

arahats.....

example of practice.....129, 130
knowing the Three Kayas.....308
afterglow.....
limited action models.....285
of enlightenment.....213
still think.....309
aftershocks.....
technically enlightened.....288
of Fruition.....212
vs. buddhas.....330
agendas.....3
which bhumi?.....330
for Morality.....6
arahatship.....
altered states.....9, 13, 52, 53
defilements and.....275
abandonment of.....12
arrogance.....
insights beyond.....12
and ego.....275
ordinary practice and.....116
as map side effect.....170
severe.....115
of arahats.....275
sleep deprivation and.....115
of the Mahayana.....218
anagami.....
ascetics.....
anagami.....274
neurotic.....62
mature.....281
astral plane.....148
analogy.....
attachment.....62
of a racecar driver.....22
and suffering door.....242
of confetti.....24
seeing clearly.....197
of Damnitall.....232
to rights and rituals.....96
of dog chasing own tail.....63
attention.....
of horse trainer.....42
focus of.....

of Shootin' Aliens.....42
in 8th jhana
of the candle.....315
.....
of the cart.....34
163
of the Ferrari.....237
in first jhana
of the hill (and fractals).....225
.....
of the stinking drunk.....201
140
of the toothless dog.....195
of the two waves.....309
Index
in fourth jhana
in the Dark Night.....201
.....
blinking.....208
143
bliss.....
in the 7th jhana
of third jhana.....142
.....
vs. insight.....111
162
Bliss Models.....307
in second jhana
bliss-junkie.....
.....
becoming a.....46
141
bliss-junkies.....49
in third jhana
Bodhisattva Vow.....321
.....
arahat that took.....331
142
as True Self teaching.....156
microscopic vs. macroscopic.....100
misinterpretation of.....65
moving vs. stable.....77
misunderstanding.....105
narrow vs. broad.....76

postponing enlightenment.....117
attraction.....
Bodhisattva Vows.....314
eliminating.....273
bodhisattvas.....
formal definition.....63
immortality models.....267
aura.....292
of 8th bhumi and above.....330
aversion.....
body.....
and emptiness door.....242
as not self.....29
eliminating.....273
feeling suffering in.....64
formal definition.....63
image of in jhana.....142
seeing clearly.....197
takeing care of.....116
to formal practice.....194
twisting.....174
awakening.....
books.....
defined.....30
friendly.....vii
synonyms for.....15
limits of.....v
awareness.....
my very favorite.....167
and suffering door.....242
throwing out the window.....228
as not nothingness.....162
vs. teachers.....80
as not space.....160
writing post A&P.....181
defined.....155
boundless consciousness.....160
not boundless consciousness.....161
breath.....
space-like.....161
as concentration object.....9
backsliding.....
as continuous entity.....139
between paths.....257

as mere sensations.....106
beyond first path.....256
as physical object.....75
bhumi.....290
impermanence of.....23
bhumi.....
investigation of.....21
arahats and.....330
jerky or ratchet-like.....172
first.....211
object of concentration practices.....136
bhumis.....252
buddha.....
references for.....290
as sometimes meaning arahat.....329
Big Issue.....127
Buddha.....
Bill Hamilton.....219, 297
basic message.....2
Bill Hamilton.....
constantly learning.....331
great one-liners.....309, 343
defining suffering.....332
model of vipassana jhanas.....219
enlightened action and.....288
on Nirodha samapatti.....353
last words.....16
why get enlightened?.....262
master of relative?.....331
bleedthrough.....
merging with.....242
and the Dark Night.....185
praising samatha masters.....135
Index
representing dharmakaya.....312
confused.....112
summary of teachings.....60
in negative emotions.....120
vs. Buddhism.....92
knowing ordinary humanity and.....313
Buddha Nature.....156
misdirected.....63
True Self teaching.....331
sensations of.....121

buddhas.....
competition.....
behaving in strange ways.....330
danger of.....169
definition of.....330
conceit.....
technically enlightened.....288
in non-duality terms.....275
vs. arahats.....330
concentration.....
Buddhism.....
and Dissolution.....231
early.....339, 345
as factor of first jhana.....140
lip service to.....337
as factor of second jhana.....141
Buddhists.....
unitive experiences.....157
not wanting enlightenment.....343
Concentration.....
Burmese Buddhism.....117
and tranquility.....47
Cardinal Rule.....
and walking.....74
of attainments.....248
as content.....106
Carlos Castanada.....149
as Factor of Enlightemnent.....38
cause and effect.....
as Spiritual Faculty.....34
as interdependence.....64
balancing with energy.....35
celebacy.....
disposable foundation.....10
fascination with.....193
excess and deficiency.....35
celebration.....
first goal.....9
of attainments.....214
formal instructions.....9
Cessation.....353
how long?.....10
cessation of perception and feeling.....
limits of.....111

appendix on.....353
momentary.....47
as King Daddy of attainments.....356
not liberating.....11
higher than 8th jhana.....163
objects of.....9
chakras.....292
psychological insights and.....131
Chakras.....
shadow sides.....11
energetic models and.....266
the essential point.....9
change.....18
The Second Training.....9
Characteristics.....3, 16, 109, 227
vs. cold beer.....55
Characteristics.....
vs. insight practices.....41
as 33
concentration practices.....
foundation.....16
blessing and hindrance.....135
thoughts.....23
endlessly interesting.....133
chi 292
foundation of insight practices.....134
Chi.....
in Review.....253
Chi.....266
inertia of.....253
Chi Nul.....126, 310
useful instructions.....139
choiceless awareness.....75
concentration states.....133
Christianity.....
concepts.....
as True Self tradition.....153
juvenile fixation on.....154
Chronic Dark Night Yogis.....198
Confucius.....
cognitive restructuring.....125
representing nirmanakaya.....312
from Hell.....196
confusion.....

commitment.....
and \.....287
power of.....25
due to Mushroom Factor.....341
compassion.....
investigation of.....120
as motivation.....63
relating to Paths.....257
Index
consciousness.....
and models of perfection.....328
as mental echo.....18
Dhammadinna.....353
crude mental impression.....19
dharma combat.....97
content.....
Dharma Eye.....
as spiritual focus.....97
Dharma Eye.....278
buying into.....127
Dharma Jet Set.....342
enlightened beings and.....104
Dharma Underground.....345
spinning in.....103
dharmakaya.....312
to insight.....127
and transcendence.....313
value of.....56
Dharmakaya.....325
couch potato stage.....190
sticking around.....330
crash.....
Dipa Ma.....303
post A&P.....178
disappointment.....
craving.....62
nirmanakaya and.....309
Crazy Wisdom School.....286
over reality of enlightenment.....288
Crimson and Clover.....24
discipline.....
crisis.....
value of.....78
of identity.....185, 200

disempowerment.....
Crowley, Aleister.....150, 226
high standards and.....328
cult leaders.....198
dishonesty.....
culture.....
about realization.....322
limiting \.....287
dissatisfaction.....
cushion.....
and suffering.....28
on the, defined.....73
divine apathy.....210
Damnitall.....232
divorce.....
Daniel M. Ingram.....
in the Dark Night.....196
bio346
dogma.....
don't believe me!.....349
and religion.....92
favorite movie.....346
as practice.....95
dark comedy.....312
Buddhism as.....92
death.....
Christianity as.....92
fear of.....206
rigid adherence to.....34, 85, 120
reflection on.....17
donations.....105
defilements.....
double-dip unknowing event 180, 206, 247,
as empty.....112
249
negative emotions.....119
drugs.....
repressing.....124
abuse of by teachers.....342
rights and rituals.....96
fast or dangerous?.....116
delusion.....64
dry insight workers.....134
delusion.....

duality.....
defined.....30
logic always assuming.....332
depression.....
resolution of paradox.....208
and the Dark Night.....190
dyana.....133
in Re-observation.....196
dzogchen.....133
one cause of.....46
Fundamental Perception Models....270
desire.....
mistaking formless realms for. 160, 161,
and compassion.....62
164
as Second Noble Truth.....62
effort.....
compassion in.....121
and non-effort.....105
dangerous term.....62
and surrender.....32
investigation of.....28
applied and sustained.....141
neurosis and.....62
applied and sustained (factor of first
despair.....
jhana).....140
Index
heroic.....197
Energetic Models.....292
heroic, defined.....116
energy.....
One Fortunate Attachment.....106
and investigation.....44
thoughts of.....122
and the A&P.....230
too much.....117
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
when it really pays off.....174
as Spiritual Faculty.....34
ego.....
balancing with concentration.....35
and desire.....62
blockage of.....174

and self-preservation.....341
effects of posture on.....73
and suffering.....61
excess and deficiency.....35
as filter for compassion.....63
frustration and.....113
bruising of enlightened beings 215
of emotional life.....119
elimination of.....154
resolutions and.....79
flogging self with.....276
skillful use of.....65
Freudian definition.....276
enlighenment.....
high mystical sense.....276
formal definition.....56
pop psychology meaning.....275
three uses of term.....55
process of.....30, 112
enlightened.....
process of.....
technically vs. -action.....288
stopping
enlightened beings.....248
.....
feeling fullness of humanity.....313
65
getting caught in false models.....322
strength.....276
strange stories about.....330
three meanings of.....275
enlightenment.....
egolessness.....28
a year and a day.....252
Eight Worldly Winds.....309
A&P mimicking.....231
embarrassment.....
absolutely possible.....337
of overrating attainments.....259
and a cave in Tibet.....65
emotional perfection.....
and lineage transmission.....343
simple model and.....284
checklist for.....248

emotions.....
completely unpractical.....261
and scripting.....234
danger of describing.....261
as fuel for practice.....119
desire for.....120
as It.....288
non-negotiable.....330
dark, in 3rd insight stage.....173
one being, all beings?.....332
investigation of.....120
sudden and gradual.....126
negative.....
synonyms for.....15
models of eliminating
talking about.....339
.....
vs. omniscience.....104
323
envy.....8
perfection of.....273
equanimity.....
repressing.....273
and mindfulness.....48
wasting power of.....122
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
emptiness.....28
as factor of third jhana.....142
as not 8th jhana.....163
culminating in fourth jhana.....143
as not nothingness.....162, 164
defined.....47
chapter on.....245
in formless realms.....159
checklist for.....247
in the Dark Night.....231
defined.....28
vs. indifference.....50
misuse of term.....101
evangelism.....
shunyata.....321
post A&P.....181
teachings of and myocardial infarctions
exercise.....

.....329
eliminating stuff vs. split.....323
Index
exercises.....
on my third retreat.....236
front and back of head.....22
formless realms.....159
investigating emotions.....120
and Nirodha samapatti.....353
investigating thoughts.....23
post fruition.....130
investigation of breath.....23
Four Noble Truths.....
investigation of suffering.....27
defined.....60
our favorite half of reality.....310
desire, cause of suffering.....62
two fingers.....22
Noble Eightfold Path.....66
existence.....
Four Path Model.....
continuity of.....17
problems with.....279
experiential reality.....
fourth path.....
defined.....17
defilements and.....275
Extinction Models.....316
fractals.....177
eyelids flickering.....137
and Khabbala.....227
faith.....
and the Four Path Model.....226
and the maps.....169
obsession with.....256
as Spiritual Faculty.....34
Twelfth Path and.....256
balancing with wisdom.....34
vipassana jhanas and.....225
excess and deficiency.....34
Fruition.....
lack of.....110
attainments mimicking.....246
fantasy.....

post A&P.....255
getting lost in.....190
sorting out from A&P Event.....240
fantasy-land.....
vs. Nirodha samapatti.....355
and models of enlightenment as.....322
Fruitions.....
fasting.....115
unavoidability of in enlightened beings
fear.....
.....248
and arahats.....310
frustration.....120
as insight stage.....191
compassion in.....121
as motivation.....113
in Desire for Deliverance.....193
compassion in.....121
in Dissolution.....190
investigation of.....28
fun8, 24
of madness and death.....206
concentration states and.....58, 133
relating to Paths.....257
epicureanism and.....125
feelings.....
first jhana as.....140
extremes of in Dark Night.....196
in Review.....214
reacting to strong ones.....202
unsatisfactoriness and.....133
first bhumi.....290
future.....
Five Buddha Families.....121, 226
sensations of.....113
Five Path Model.....291
-mind.....114
five senses.....18
Genesis 1.2.....242
Five Spiritual Faculties.....
goal.....
alternate order.....36
dangers of.....114
and The Three Trainings.....37

good vs. bad.....113
cause for awakening.....37
lack of.....111
defined.....34
method vs. result.....114
fork in the road.....255
Western neuroses and.....117
hard to find post A&P.....255
God.....
formations.....206
and dharmakaya.....313
and vipassana jhana maps.....228
Fruition and.....211
as gateway to the The Three Doors.208
God Models.....266
culmination of insight stages.....208
God Models.....301
in the formless realms.....208
gold standard.....17
noting and.....236
for Concentration.....13
Index
for insight practices.....13, 127
similar to Theravada.....321
for morality.....13
hindrances.....
for progress in insight.....170
and mindfulness.....41
for reality.....17
Hinduism.....
golden chains.....164
as True Self Tradition.....153
good life.....8
hot coal.....241
Grace.....113
ignorance.....
grandiosity.....258
and impermanence door.....242
about high ideals.....328
cause of suffering.....26
in the Dark Night.....196
formal definition.....63
investigation of.....28
illusion of a separate self.....

Great Sacred Neurotic Crap Wallow....294
debunking.....23
Great Spiritual Basket Case.....203
illusion of continuity.....
Great Stream Enterer, The.....237
creation of.....18
greed.....64
debunking.....22, 23, 25
eliminating.....273
illusion of duality.....
fourth defilement.....275
and the non-duality models.....274
grounding down.....
and True Self.....157
after psychic powers.....147
inherent pain of.....26
guilt.....8
illusion of separate self.....
guru.....79
creation of.....112
not decorated by.....215
illusion of solidity.....
gurus.....

concentration practice and.....133
plagued by scandal.....342
foundation of concentration practice
habits.....
.....139
elimininating unskillful.....330
Immortality models.....314
Halfway Up the Mountain School.....286
impermanence.....
hallucinogens.....11
and suffering.....26
happiness.....
defined.....16
all beings wanting.....131
door.....241
as factor of second jhana.....141
indifference.....
factor of first jhana.....140
vs. equanimity.....49
investigation of.....141
insight.....
plan for.....55
fundamental.....12
search for.....64
insight meditation.....
three causes of.....52
defined.....16
Happy Place.....296
insight practices.....
hatred.....64
and The Seven Factors of
eliminating.....273
Enlightenment.....47
fifth defilement.....275
basic assumptions of.....26
healing.....
basic instructions.....171
ditching split and.....323
Big Issue and.....128
health.....
difficult and disconcerting.....133
wrecking in the Dark Night.....200
example of great skill in.....130
heart attacks.....

fucking up your life.....185
teachings on emptiness and.....329
great practice.....19
heat.....
in afterglow of jhana.....143
sensations of.....174
inertia of.....253
Hercules.....126
investigation of no-self.....31
High Equanimity.....163
irrelevance of object.....19
higher paths.....
limits of.....14
and the Three Doors.....244
not for everyone.....110
Hinayana.....109, 320
samatha jhanas as object of.....140
Index
slowing down.....135
boundless space (5th jhana)
those who should not do them.....187
.....
two-finger exercise.....22
130, 159
used to break up siddhis.....147
Buddha's praise of
useful assumptions of.....17, 334
.....
value of retreats.....68
135
vs. concentration practices.....41, 111
chapter on
vs. content.....106
.....
when and where.....67
139
zazen.....109
first jhana
integration.....
.....
chapter on.....333
139
loving-kindness and.....65
first jhana:five factors of

intentions.....
.....
walking meditation and.....74
140
interconnectedness.....7
first jhana:importance of
and the Mahayana.....321
.....
interdependence.....
140
and karma.....64
formless realms:getting lost in
interviews.....81
.....
intimacy.....
164
and transcendence.....313
fourth jhana
investigation.....
.....
and insight stage 3.....230
143
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
getting fooled by
defined.....40
.....
of certainty, confusion, etc.....257
142, 144
of comparison.....258
getting stuck in
of hindrances.....41
.....
of nothingness.....162
140, 159, 162
of samatha jhanas.....140
investigating
of space.....160
.....
James Bond.....204
140
jealousy.....120
mimicking Fruition
jhana.....
.....

confusing term.....134
246
first.....134
neither perception nor yet non-
samatha.....10, 133
perception (8th jhana)
avoiding like plague
.....
.....
163, 246
143
neither perception nor yet non-
basic pattern of progress
perception (8th jhana):pre-
.....
Nirodha samapatti
137
.....
being fooled by
354
.....
nothingness (7th jhana)
134
.....
benefits of
161, 162, 212, 246
.....
progress of insight in background of
134
.....
boundless consciousness (6th jhana)
249
.....
160, 161
Index
second jhana
as concentration object.....9
.....
kundalini.....
141, 230
and the A&P.....178
soft vs. hard
junkie.....230
.....

spontaneous.....179
136
Kundalini.....292
third jhana
language.....
.....
limits of.....153
142
Lao Tzu.....
valid vacation
representing sambhogakaya.....312
.....
laundry.....
135
post-enlightenment.....321
vipassana.....217
leading onward.....254
Bill Hamilton's model of
let it go.....
.....
and equanimity.....48
219
limits and uses of.....16
first
literal vs. insight.....335
.....
talking about.....101
171
lights.....
fourth
visions of.....176, 205
.....
limited possible action models.....288
181
lineage.....
fourth:formations
transmission.....343
.....
lineages.....
207
self-perfection.....328
second
little mush demons.....205, 236
.....

long-term view.....258
175
lotus position.....74
third
love.....
.....
radiating.....266
178
Love Models.....317
Visuddhimagga model
LSD.....115, 302
.....
LSD.....
228
-esque insight side effects.....135
jhana-junkies.....164
luminosity.....
jobs.....
and the Vajrayana.....321
dissatisfaction with.....195
dharmakaya as deathless.....313
judgment.....8
of space.....160
investigation of.....28
lung.....292
Kalu Rinpoche.....157
lust.....120
karma.....
and the A&P.....179
law of.....64
eliminating.....273
Karma Models.....306
macroscopic.....
kasina.....
value of.....311
practice.....137
madness.....
kindness.....8
fear of in Equanimity.....206
knees.....
touching in the Dark Night.....197
preservation of.....74
magic.....145
Knowledges of Suffering.....181

Mahasi Sayadaw.....vi
koan.....
Mahayana.....320
beyond philosophy.....34
Mahayana.....
reason it works.....112
propaganda.....218
relation to noting practice.....40
Mandalas.....
Index
as pictures of fractals.....227
vs. \.....36
mantra.....
mindfulness meditation.....41
as concentration object.....9
confusing term.....41
maps.....
models.....
and scripting.....234
dangers of fixation on.....257
dangers of.....169
limited emotional range.....
laughing at.....258
literal interpretation of
taking to extreme.....258
.....
uses of insight maps.....169
322
Master Posers.....245
projecting
meditation.....
.....
and kids.....67
342
devotional.....95
limited emotional range model.....277
focus of.....75
limited emotional range models.....273
imitation of.....95
limited possible action.....
lingo of.....80
literal interpretation of
mental vs. physical objects.....76
.....

narrow vs. broad.....76
322
on sights.....76
projecting
on sounds.....76
.....
one-pointed.....76
342
portable.....67
limited possible thought.....341
predictors of progress.....69
non-duality.....
mental illness.....
best model
and the Dark Night.....199
.....
Middle Way.....158
322
Middle Way.....
of enlightenment.....261
between no-self and True Self.....153
of perfection.....328
mind.....
particle.....241
defined.....18
stream entry.....278
mirror-like nature.....242
wave.....241
no-mind.....33
models of enlightenment.....
mind moments.....
Action Models.....266, 285
frozen.....178
basic categories.....265
mind noise.....49, 100
Emotional Models.....266, 272
and our stuff.....333
Energetic Models.....266
defilements and.....125
essential principle.....263
extremes of.....194
Extinction Models.....267
in Disgust.....192
First Path.....274

retreats amplifying.....105
Four Path Model.....274
wish for end of.....192
Fourth Path.....274
mind reading.....146
Fundamental Perception Models....270
mindfulness.....
Fundamental Perceptual Models.....265
and Cause and Effect.....229
God Models.....266
and equanimity.....48
Heart Sutra Model.....283
and Mind and Body.....229
Immortality Models.....267
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
Karma Models.....266
as factor of third jhana.....142
Love Models.....267
as Spiritual Faculty.....34
Never Returner.....274
balancing effect of.....36
Non-Duality Model.....268, 284
defined.....36
Non-Duality Models.....265
of mind and body.....171
Once Returner.....274
uses of.....38
Perpetual Bliss Models.....267
Index
Physical Models.....266
borrowing from.....155
Power Models.....288
near miss.....210
Powers Models.....266
neither perception nor yet non-perception
Psychological Models.....266
.....163
Radiance Models.....266
neuroses.....
Revised Four Path Model.....279
as It.....288
Second Path.....274
right speech as.....100
Simple Model.....283

spinning in.....100
Social Models.....267
Nibbana.....
sources.....263
as dharmakaya.....313
Specific Knowledge Models.....266
as Ultimate Dharma.....156
Specific Perception Models.....271
nirmanakaya.....309
Specific Perceptual Models.....265
Nirodha samapatti.....353
Stream Entry.....274
Nirodha Samapatti.....289
Sudden Schools of Awakening.....269
Nirvana.....15
Sudden vs. Gradual.....268
and Fruition.....211
The Five Path Model.....268
bliss of.....312
The Four Path Model.....268
chapter on.....245
The Ten Bodhisattva Bhumis.....268
first and second meanings.....280
Third Path.....274
immortality models.....267
Thought Models.....266
without remainder.....332
Transcendence Models.....267
no free lunch.....149
Unitive Models.....267
no mind.....18
monastics.....
no-self.....
neurosis and.....62
and Tantra.....109
Morality.....
and True Self.....153
and karma.....64
as dharmakaya or nirmanakaya.....312
conventional, value of.....288
as Third Characteristic.....28
first training.....4
dangers of.....30
good life.....5

door.....242
intent.....6
formations demonstrating.....207
kindness.....6
useful theory on.....29, 30
references.....7
Noble Eightfold Path(s).....
value of content.....106
right thought.....124
morons.....
Noble Silence.....100
oxy- vs. regular.....329
non-dual.....
motivation.....
one of my favorit e words.....157
and ultimate compassion.....112
non-duality.....
compassion and confusion.....119
as freedom.....113
looking for itself.....113
Nothing To Do School.....324
profundity of.....111
nothingness.....161
right.....122
noting.....
to not listen.....104
and the maps.....170
Mushroom Factor.....
as foundation practice.....44
and Dark Night Yogis.....199
helpful mottos.....43
and standards for teachers.....344
my favorite practice.....39
cause of doubt.....110
on retreat, example of.....235
chapter on.....339
practice of.....39
confusion caused by.....133
uses in Dissolution.....190
Mushroom Theory.....102
when things are too fast.....173
mystery.....
Nouveau Tibetan Buddhists.....218
and clarity.....248

objects.....
Nargarjuna.....
kasina.....137
Index
of meditation.....
perceptual threshold.....
choosing
increasing.....21
.....
perfection, ideals of.....119, 193, 328
136
not completely useless.....328
omniscience.....293
permanence.....
on the ride.....181
as illusion.....28
again.....256
Perpetual Bliss Models.....307
One by One as They Occurred.....218
personality.....
One Technique Freak.....25
as nirmanakaya.....309
Original Face.....242
philosophers.....
out of body experiences.....
on par with lawyers.....153
as basis for insight.....150
philosophy.....
in A&P.....176
post A&P.....181
uses of.....146
vs. insight.....16
pain.....
Physical Models.....302
and posture.....74
positive attitude.....8
and suffering.....28
posture.....
from insight stages.....172
commentaries advice on.....136
neck, back, jaw.....173
obsession with.....173, 254
of new progress of insight.....254
postures.....73

returning in Dissolution.....190
reclining.....73
pansy critics.....
sitting.....73
dropping dead.....42
standing.....74
paranirvana.....332
walking.....74
paranoia.....
prana.....292
and Fear.....191
prana.....
and the Dark Night.....190
Prana.....266
particle model.....18
Precepts,.....7
passion.....
progress of insight.....
power of.....120
controlling.....251
Path of Accumulation.....291
defined.....166
Path of Meditation.....291
influence on the enlightened.....249
Path of Seeing.....291
lack of honesty about.....237
Path of Unification.....291
practices leading to.....133
Path(s).....
slowing down.....216
as object of fascination.....252
stages of.....
attaining higher paths.....252
1. Mind and Body
danger of counting.....259
.....
first.....211
171
as goal of Hinayana
10. Re-observation
.....
.....
321
193, 235

how many?.....257
10. Re-observation:vs. stage 3
limits of.....213
.....
second.....
193
minimum standard for teaching
10. Re-obvservation:as distinct entity
.....
.....
344
182
third.....
11. Equanimity
and Nirodha samapatti
.....
.....
203
353
what to do aferwards.....237
Index
11. Equanimity:formless vibrations
.....
.....
176
163
5. Dissolution
11. Equanimity:psychic powers and
.....
.....
181
150
8. Disgust
12. Conformity
.....
.....
192
211
9. Desire for Deliverance
13. Change of Lineage
.....
.....
192
211

and vipassana jhanas
14. Path
.....
.....
228
211
Dark Night
15. Fruition
.....
.....
181
211
Dark Night:advice for
15. Fruition:vs. A&P Event
.....
.....
185, 197
180
Dark Night:backsliding into
16. Review
.....
.....
236
213, 253
Dark Night:being haunted by
2. Cause and Effect
.....
.....
197
172
Dark Night:beyond first path
3. The Three Characteristics
.....
.....
256
173, 229
Dark Night:chancing into
4. The Arising and Passing Away
.....
.....
196
175
Dark Night:convergence of
4. The Arising and Passing

.....
Away:A&P Event
193
.....
Dark Night:disclosing details of
179
.....
4. The Arising and Passing
232
Away:mimicking Fruition
Dark Night:hanging out in
.....
.....
246
253
4. The Arising and Passing
Dark Night:on or off retreat?
Away:mistaking for stage 11.
.....
.....
238
177
Dark Night:timing of
4. The Arising and Passing
.....
Away:psychic powers and
256
.....
Dark Night:vibrations in
150
.....
4. The Arising and Passing
184
Away:The Ten Corruptions of
getting stuck in
Insight and
.....
231
Index
gold standard for
danger of.....45
.....
defined.....44
234

factor of first jhana.....140
rolling up mat stage
in Fear.....191
.....
investigation of.....141
195
raptures.....45
tendency to suck
reality.....
.....
and the psychic powers.....145
227
reality testing.....80
talking about.....341
realization.....
taped description of.....235
dangers of describing.....259
projection.....
early or late in life?.....323
of false models onto enlightened beings
fading?.....255
.....341
rebirth.....
of negativity in Dark Night.....185
enlightement and.....274
projections.....
fixation on.....101
onto gurus, etc.....342
red flags.....257
psychic powers.....
reference point.....
6th jhana as basis for.....160
and formations.....209
and The Three Doors.....241
describing absence of.....276
buddhas mastering.....330
reflection.....
ethics of.....146
dangers of.....19
fourth jhana as base for.....144
relationships.....
hints for obtaining.....150
and insight induced mood swings....204
love-hate relationship to.....145

enlightenment and.....272
madness and.....146
wrecking in the Dark Night.....200
power models.....289
relaxation.....
real?.....144
permission for.....139
section on.....144
samatha jhanas and.....135
seeking guidance!.....146
renunciation.....
siddhi hangover.....147
and enlightenment.....53
skillful use of.....148
and fun.....214
spontaneous and from insight stages150
and insight stages.....193
Psychological Models.....294
and the 3rd insight stage.....173
psychological perfection.....294
three distinct types.....53
psychotherapists.....
resolutions.....
and the Dark Night.....188
and the psychic powers.....147
vs. meditation teachers.....105
for the Dark Night.....185, 200
psychotherapy.....
to slow progress.....135
vs. meditation.....104
value of.....78
pure land one.....
resolve.....78
One.....354
responsibility.....
pure land two.....
for progress.....169
, 354
retreats.....337
questions.....
retreats.....
lack of good.....343
crossing thresholds with.....69
two practical.....351

drugs and.....116
Radiance Models.....303
my best ever.....235
rage.....120
overdoing it.....115
rapture.....
poor use of.....97
and the A&P.....230
value of.....68
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
right speach.....
as factor of second jhana.....141
post-insight.....335
Index
rites and rituals.....
shadow sides.....
stream entry and.....278
of techniques re.....
sadness.....
realization
compassion in.....121
.....
in Misery.....191
287
saints.....
Shakespeare.....85, 153
enlightened action and.....288
shamanic pathworking.....149
sakadagami.....
shunyata.....321
sakadagami.....274
shunyata.....
salvation.....
Fundamental Perception Models....270
source of.....58
shushumna.....292
samadhi.....9, 133
siddhi bleedthrough.....149
samatha.....9, 133, 204, 209, 246
siddhi hangover.....147
sambhogakaya.....311
sila4
sample plan.....238
silence.....

Samsara.....
investigating.....160
as Nirvana.....312
sitting.....
Sariputta.....
for long periods.....115
my hero.....218
Six Realms.....122
scholarship.....350
six sense doors.....
scripting.....
as nirmanakaya.....309
a danger of the maps.....234
defined.....32
in the Dark Night.....203
included in formations.....207
second attention.....148
sleep.....
second path.....
retreats and.....115
defilements and.....275
sleeping.....
revised model.....280
reclining and.....73
self
standing and.....74
as refuge.....62
soapbox.....
desire and.....62
sectarianism.....85
self-oppression.....8
social commentary.....
self-realized.....
dangers of.....vii
and arahats.....329
Social Models.....318
sense of humor.....
solidity.....
insight and.....131
and impermanence.....20
lack of.....59
as illusion.....28
recovering.....255
sotapanna.....

use of post-identification with sotapanna.....274
realization.....260
space.....
value of.....45
flickering.....33
Seven Factors of Enlightenment...3, 38, 44,
-case.....58
47, 66, 230
Specific Knowledge Models.....293
Seven Factors of Enlightenment.....
speech.....
and Concentration.....50
immoderate post insights.....215
and Morality.....50
spirit animals.....147
as pyramid.....38
spirit world.....148
cause for awakening.....50
spiritual path.....
correlation with the progress of insight
as Big Holy Deal.....205
.....229
screwing up on.....348
defined.....38
temptation on.....313
imbalances of.....49
spiritual quest.....
sexuality.....
and Desire for Deliverance.....193
issues and insight stages.....178
dangers of.....15
Index
spiritual trappings.....2
motivation for practice.....60
value of.....95
of fully realized beings.....332
split.....
ordinary.....54
ditching.....323, 330
overwhelming.....64
Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj.....317
rejection of insights into.....61
stages of insight.....166

Truth Number One.....60
stiffness.....
truth of.....26
from insight stages.....174
Wheel of Suffering.....267
stream entry.....211, 236
suicide.....
defilements and.....275
of highly realized beings.....332
how much practice until.....238
surrender.....
revised model.....280
and effort.....32
stress.....
table tennis.....23
samatha jhanas and.....135
taboo secrets.....
stuff. .11, 184, 203, 229, 296, 323, 333, 343
of Fruition.....247
stuff.....
tantra.....
and appropriateness 287
origins of.....205
and integration.....333
Tantra.....
as focus of practice.....75
at its best.....150
as nirmanakaya.....311
teacher.....
bringing up.....135
danger of role.....101
bubbling to the surface.....255
teachers.....79
bubbling up in Dark Night.....185
advertising styles.....339
dark, usefulness of ego strength and276
and psychic powers.....150
elimination impossible.....323
and role reversals.....215
elimination of.....266
asking question of.....81
flickering.....29
dangerous paternalism and.....232
in the Dark Night.....186

evaluators of.....341
insight into.....58
getting caught in false models.....322
insight oriented take on.....128
giving contradictory instructions.....237
limits of insight and.....59
identifying attainments.....252
models of eliminating.....322
Jet Set.....345
out-of body experiences and.....131
limits of.....85
psychic powers and.....149
limits of bios.....339
teachers and.....99
lineage and.....344
whining about.....98
making a living as.....344
working through in the Dark Night. 199
making selves redundant.....351
vs. Three Characteristics.....16
mastery threatening.....98
stupidity.....
minimum standards for.....344
and \.....287
not hearing.....97
subsubjhanas.....226
reason to work with.....168
suchness.....208
rogue teachers.....219
suffering.....
somewhat arbitrary term.....345
and concentration states.....54
true teachers.....220
and duality.....54
underground.....345
and no-self.....26
up and coming.....343
As Second Characteristic.....26
value of.....77
door.....241
value of in Dark Night.....198
end of, 3rd Noble Truth.....65
vs. psychotherapists.....105
flip side of compassion?.....61

with no insight.....107
fundamental vs. psychological.....200
teaching.....
fundamental, defined.....27
who you can reach.....343
investigation of.....27
Ten Bhumi Model.....290
Index
Ten Corruptions of Insight.....176
only three.....108
and U Pandita's model.....227
Three Illusions.....133
Ten Defilements.....
and the Three Doors.....241
Four Path Model and.....275
Three Kayas.....308
The Dark Night of The Soul.....168
Three Kayas.....
The Tibetan Book of the Dead.....168
nirmanakaya.....309
The Vinaya.....
Three Trainings.....2
strange behavior of the enlightened. 330
one act play on.....57
Theravada.....
revisited.....52
on side of arahats.....329
summary.....84
thinking.....
talking with teachers and.....81
magicial.....149
tensions between.....59
third path.....
Three Ultimate Dharmas.....156
defilements and.....275
and the Three Kayas.....312
luminosity.....281
Three Yanas.....320
revised model.....280
Tibetan Buddhism.....
Thought Models.....297
as colorful and complex.....117
thoughts.....
Tibetan Models.....290, 291

and arahats.....309
Titmuss, Christopher.....328
as five sense doors.....210
tranquility.....
as not self.....29
as Factor of Enlightenment.....38
circular.....128
defined.....46
experience of.....24
in Dissolution.....231
formal investigation of.....23
teachers and.....80
getting lost in.....77
Transactional Analysis.....294
good and bad.....25
transcendence.....
not getting lost in.....21
and dharmakaya.....313
obsessive.....35
and intimacy.....313
of attainment.....255
Transcendence Models.....315
Removal of Distracting.....124
transference.....295
right thought.....124
tri-ality.....207
stopping.....57, 209
True Self.....
suicidal.....192
as dharmakaya or nirmanakaya.....312
Three Characteristics.....
as no-self.....104
and the end of suffering.....63
formal discussion of.....153
as basis for insight stages.....171
practical application of.....157
as only way.....108
teachings in Buddhism.....156
Fundamental Perception Model.....270
TV snow.....18, 20
heroic investigation of.....116
Twelfth Path.....256
non-conceptual understanding of....175
Twelfth Path(s).....

of difficult issues.....129
suffering due to.....258
of hindrances.....41
U Pandita.....337
rose by any other name.....109
ultimate bodhichitta.....241
shadow sides of.....214
Ultimate Reality.....
Three Characteristics.....270
use of teachings on.....155
vs. content.....97
ultimate truth.....
Three Doors.....
good and bad as.....310
and formless realms.....241
ultimate wisdom.....14
and the A&P Event.....180
underwater.....
as six doors.....243
feeling of being.....177
chapter on.....240
unitive experiences.....
example of.....130
and nirmanakaya.....313
not proceeding 8th jhana.....164
not the answer.....157
Index
Unity Models.....318
walking.....
unsatisfactoriness.....26
jerky or ratchet-like.....172
Upaka.....303
walking wounded.....199
Vajrayana.....320
watcher.....
vedena.....
and formations.....207
defined.....45
and Mind and Body.....171
vibrations.....
and The Three Doors.....240
and interference patterns.....177
as non-existent observer.....157
and the phase of the breath.....191

awareness as not.....156
as predominant experience.....206
not separate or thing.....28
being torn to pieces by.....194
unfindable.....29
first characteristic.....17
wave model.....18
formless.....206
Wazoo.....341
good investigation of.....130
Western Buddhists.....
in Dark Night.....184
very low standards of.....337
instant perception of by enlightened
William Blake.....117
beings.....249
Wisdom.....
investigation as sport.....21
as Spiritual Faculty.....34
mind moments.....103
balancing with faith.....34
no magic frequencies.....20
danger of discussing.....103
speed of.....20
excess and deficiency.....34
views.....
fundamental instructions.....13
becoming sacred.....261
ordinary.....14
Vimuttimagga.....136, 149
radiating.....266
Vinaya.....92
relative vs. ultimate.....14
Vinegar Tasters, The.....312
showing lack of.....96
vipassana.....
The Third Training.....12
defined.....16
vital assumptions.....12
vision.....
Wisdom Eye.....
of Big Issue.....130
blinking.....282
vision-quest.....115

Wisdom Eye.....278
visions.....
wise remorse.....8
as basis for insight.....150
yoga-butt.....
in Equanimity.....205
yoga-butt.....266, 267
sleep deprivation and.....115
You Are Already There School.....324
visualization.....
zazen.....133
as concentration object.....9
Zen.....321
Visuddhimagga.....136, 149, 167, 228
awareness of insight stages.....169
Void, The.....242
culture of.....117
Void, The.....
on side of buddhas.....329
as not nothingness.....162
Document Outline
1.Introduction to Part I
2.Morality, The First and Last Training
3.Concentration, The Second Training
4.Wisdom, The Third Training
5.The Three Characteristics
The Five Spiritual Faculties
6.The Seven Factors of Enlightenment
7.The Three Trainings Revisited
8.The Four Noble Truths
9.Practical Meditation Considerations
10.Summary
11.Conclusion to Part I
12.Introduction to Parts II & III
13.Buddhism vs. The Buddha *
14.Content and Ultimate Reality *
15.What Went Wrong? *
16.A Clear Goal
17.Harnessing the Energy of the “Defilements”
18.Right Thought and the Aegean Stables
19.From Content to Insight
20.Concentration vs. Insight
21.The Concentration States (Samatha Jhanas)
22.No-self vs. True Self

23.The Formless Realms
24.The Progress of Insight
25.The Vipassana Jhanas
26.How the Maps Help
27.The Three Doors
28.“Was That Emptiness?”
29.Beyond First Path (“What Next?”)
30.Models of the Stages of Enlightenment *
31.So What’s “Full Enlightenment”? *
32.Integration*
33.It is Possible!
34.More on the “Mushroom Factor”*
35.So Who The Heck Is Daniel M. Ingram?
36.Conclusion And Best Wishes